

Halo: Rookie No More

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Summary: A squad of young ODSTs with no support, a city under siege and an army of Covenant troops surrounding them. Can these new leathernecks survive? Not without the help from an ODST Legend, the mysterious man known as "The Rookie". Male Human X Female Sangheili

## 1. The Promotion

**\*\*I do not own Halo or any of the characters\*\***

**\*\*\*Special thanks to Sabere Commander for giving me advice and creating the name of the story\*\*\***

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**<p><strong>Halo: Rookie No More<strong>**

**"\*\*The impossible is done with the Lord's help and a few good men and women"-Unknown U.S Marine\*\***

**\*\*The Promotion\*\***

**\*\*Sydney Australia-February 9\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553\*\***

Admiral Hood impatiently checks his watch for the tenth time that day. It's getting late; he needs to return to Cairo station before midnight, he has important matters to discuss with the Arbiter concerning the construction of the new embassies.

"Don't worry sir; they'll be here soon," another officer said as he steps up next to the Admiral. He is wearing a clean white dress uniform just like the Fleet Admiral; only his insignia is lacking a few stars, marking him as a Rear Admiral.

Hood sighs and shakes his head slightly, "They are already five

minutes late Derek, and now \_I'm\_ running late."

"Sir, please believe when I tell you this, my team has something that may interest you," pesters the Rear Admiral.

Hood doesn't doubt that. He, as well as everyone else in the Navy, knew Derek Gretna is a glory hound, a person who would give anything to have Hood's job one day. He purposely takes needless risks, puts the lives of his men and women on the line and he always abuse his naval power on those of lesser rank. The only reason Hood keeps the man around is because he can get results unlike most people who was made an officer in the past decade. Gretna hardly has any true victories, but when he does, it's usually a large success, like the time he won a naval battle against a Covenant destroyer with just two frigates. However, this doesn't always make up for the Admiral's risk free nature.

"Your team?" questions Hood, "and might I ask who your team is Admiral?"

Gretna shrugs, "Oh just some ODS'Ts I picked up, nobody important."

He stops when Hood gives him an evil glare before saying, "At this point and age Admiral, every life is important, including the men you send into the fray."

Before Gretna could mutter a responds, a young navy man ran up to them, salutes and says, "Sirs, we have an inbound Pelican one mike out, their call signs and serial codes marks them as the Alpha One Squad sir."

Gretna instantly swells his chest as he replies with, "Thank you Warrant Officer," before turning back to Hood, "See, my task force is almost back with their cargo."

"And what, pray tell, is their cargo?" asks a slightly weary Hood.

Gretna only smiles as he says, "Now that's the question, isn't it?"

Hood just sighs before walking over to the guardrail and leans on it. The only good thing about this whole situation is that whatever it is, it's big. Hood can tell that Gretna is just giddy with joy over whatever it is that's coming.

He hears a low pitch whistle and looks up at the evening orange sky, dully noting the ocean softly lapse against the beach that the base is erected on. The runway is clear saving for a few deck personnel who are rushing back and forth in preparations to bring in an inbound flight.

With age eagle like eyes, Hood stares up into the sky, looking for any sign of an aircraft when he sees it. It's a green pelican, but he can instantly tell that there's something wrong. A small fire is burning on the left wing, black smoke is being pump somewhere from out of the rear and every so often the ship would tilt forward as if it's about to plunge into the sea but it would always leans its nose back and continues on its ways towards the base.

Hood begins to wonder whether this mission was a success or a disaster, either way, they'll learn of it soon enough.

Steadily, almost dramatically, the Pelican makes its way closer and closer to the airstrip. Finally, with it five yards away and a few feet in the air, it lowers its landing gear as it comes down to the runway.

Suddenly as soon as the wheels touched down, the left wheel snaps off, causing the aircraft to hit the asphalt. With its front and right gear shift still rolling, the left side of the Pelican is dragged along the road, causing sparks to ignite and fly. The left side soon acts as an anchor, causing the Pelican to turn until its spinning out of control, resulting with the rest of the landing gear being ripped off. With a thunderous crash, the Pelican collapses on the ground and skids off the road for a few meters before finally coming to a halt, smoke now being emitted both from the cockpit and the rear.

Hood curses before rushing down from the raised platform he is standing on and hurries over to the downed bird where a rescue team is already hard at work.

The paramedics are wearing firefighting suits and are slowly tearing the door open, careful to ensure an inferno won't erupt due to the sudden presence of oxygen. However instead of flames, a hand shoots out and grabs a rescue man as the figure pulls itself out of the wreckage.

At first Hood thought the figure was covered in ash before realizing he is wearing a black armor set with an ODST helmet placed on the person's head, the blue visor shining brightly in the dying lights of the day.

A Corpsman tries to remove the helmet, but the trooper pushes him away and Hood hears the man say, "I'm good dude, get off of me."

While the naval doctor tries to examine the man, another trooper crawls out of the wreckage. He bends over with his hands on his knees, but when paramedics try to help him, he pushes them away like the Marine before him. He then turns back to the ship, reaches in, and pulls out another Trooper.

They gave each other a high five before turning to the ship, both reaching in, and yanks out a fourth. But this man is different; he is wearing tattered civilian clothing, has cuts and bruises on his bearded face and is handcuffed from behind. Following him out is an ODST with a M7 SMG trained on the shackled person. Keeping the gun on the man, the ODST reaches behind him, back into the smoking Pelican and pulls out yet another trooper.

The squad rallies together and looks one another over for injuries before becoming aware that the famous fleet Admiral himself is standing a few feet away from them; watching. They all snap into more respectful postures, save for two who are keeping a close eye on the bound man.

One of the shock troopers, whose armor has a silver highlighter marking the top of his helmet, walks forward and snaps a salute,

"Admiral Hood sir," the man said before looking to Hood's left, "Admiral Gretna, sir."

Hood turns to see the Rear Admiral who must have come up on his flank without being seen.

Gretna has a smug look on his face as he says, "Report Gunnery Sergeant."

The Sergeant switches to a more at ease stand before reporting, "Sir, we captured your man, hiding out in the Outback just as you said."

"Excellent," Gretna said as he waves the rest of the ODSST team over. They walk forward while one lags behind, keeping his gun pointed at the prisoner's back. Another trooper grabs the man by his collar and kicks his legs, forcing the prisoner to a kneeling position once they are in front of the Admirals.

Gretna then gestures at the man as if he is unveiling a big surprise, "Admiral Hood, I give you Norman Wright."

Hood's eyes widen a bit before stepping forward to get a better look at the man. It is hard to identify the person with the messy and overgrown hair and beard, the blood and bruises didn't help either, nor the fading sun light.

As if sensing the Admiral rousing doubts, one of the troopers takes out a data pad and hands it to the Admiral. It shows the intergalactic terrorist Norman Wright, but in the picture he is clean shaven and had close cropped hair. Hood keeps glancing between the picture and the man before him, slowly seeing the resemblance; the black hair, the low cheek bones, the cleft in his chin and the fire of hatred and loathing in his dark brown eyes.

Slowly the gravity of the situation hits the Admiral. After twenty-five years, they finally caught their slippery foe. The man has been nothing but grief to the UNSC, he caused explosions, led raids, killed officials, and worse of all he forced the Navy to split its resources as it fought the Covenant on one hand and hunted him with the other, leading to the faltering of staples and men that was needed for the genocidal war that they just survived.

"Well Mr. Wright," Hood drawls out slowly, "I can't particularly say I'm happy to see you, but I am happy to see you will no longer be causing us any more trouble."

The man glares at Hood before lowering his eyes, whether in defeat or shame, the Admiral didn't know.

Hood then looks up at the ODSST leader and says, "Good work Gunnery Sergeant, one less crack head to worry about."

It is then that Gretna steps forward and says, "Yes Hood, but need I remind you who it was I that gave the team their coordinates for the initial take down."

Hood does his best to keep his eyes from rolling as he says, "Yes, yes Gretna, very well done," he then returns his attention back to the Gunnery Sergeant, "how exactly did you nab Wright? From what I

hear he is usually surrounded by his rag tag army."

"Ask him sir," the sergeant says and points with his thumb towards the trooper holding the machine gun to Wright's back, "the Lance Corporal was the one who grabbed him."

Hood turns to look at the soldier in question. He briefly looks up at Hood before returning his gaze back to watching the prisoner. The Lance Corporal seems to be reaching six foot status and from what the Admiral could see he has a somewhat skinny yet full frame, but that could just be his armor that appears to fill him out. He has on regular gear with no modifications added; even the highlighter on top of his head that most troopers would spray paint is the plain color of grey, the color that is standard issued. In short, there appears to be nothing really remarkable about the trooper.

Putting that aside, the Admiral walks closer to the Marine and asks, "Well, how did you do it son?"

The trooper is silent before replying in a shallow voice, "Lots of bullets, lots of luck and lots of experience."

This isn't the type of response the Admiral was expecting, he would have thought the Lance Corporal would be all to please to start bragging about making the biggest catch in the recent decade.

One of the other troopers steps up next to the Admiral and whispers in a rough voice, "Don't mind him sir, he has seen the worse side of the war first hand, it had a strong effect on him."

Hood slowly nods his understanding. It isn't uncommon to meet a person who was affected strongly in the Covenant war, there are even those who have apparently lost their sanity to the horrors they were exposed to. If this Lance Corporal saw that horror and yet is still here, soldiering on and making a difference as he just had, than maybe Hood could use him.

The Admiral looks at the trooper again and asks, "Was it difficult?"

The trooper is silent before saying "no."

"How many rebels did you have to face?" Hood asks next.

"â€|Unknown," the trooper replies.

"Make a guess," the Admiral says in a slightly exasperated voice.

With his helmet on Hood couldn't tell if the trooper is annoyed or in a state of shock from talking to the Admiral, but he soon answers dully, "sixty-three."

Hood's eyes went wide before turning to the Gunnery Sergeant who says, "just about sir, Rookie here took out a whole load of them single handily, we were all shooting, but he was the one rushing in, throwing grenades and slices whoever got in his way."

Hood mauls this over as he observes the trooper some more before

asking, "Was it too difficult for you trooper?"

The ODSST simply known as Rookie is silent before saying, "if you want it done, I'll get it done sir."

Hood feels his eyes slightly widening at these words, it was almost like he knew what Hood is thinking.

Deciding he shouldn't prolong it, he then says, "trooper, stand before me."

The ODSSTs and even Admiral Gretna seems unsure what is happening, but the Rookie just shrugs, hands the SMG to the trooper standing next to him and walks forward and stands at attention before the Admiral.

They stood staring at each for a time; Hood in his crisp white suit and the Rookie in his dented armor.

Finally Hood speaks, "I am unsure if I am making a mistake or not, but one thing I am sure of is that we need leaders like you. Unafraid, uncompromising, and willing to do what must be done no matter the price."

The trooper is silent before saying or rather ask, "Sir?"

Hood clarifies for the Lance Corporal, "I'm planning on making you a platoon Lieutenant, I know this is a big leap up the ladder, but like I said, we are short on good leaders; we need all the help we can get."

The surrounding audience stands in stunned silence; even Gretna has his jaw hanging open. The Rookie may be a Marine, but they all know as Supreme Commander and hero of the UNSC Navy, Hood can promote any man he wants, and this is some promotion, to go from a grunt to a commanding officer is something rare.

Hood however keeps his attention on the Trooper before him who doesn't move or even appears to be breathing, making the Admiral unsure how he feels about this.

Finally the man simply known as Rookie asks, "Sir, when do I start?"

**\*\*Just to let you know this is like a side project to me, it's not really a primary focus of mine so it'll be updated here and there, if it becomes popular though I will try and update on a regular basis, thank you for reading and I hope you enjoyed.\*\***

## 2. The News

**\*\*The News\*\***

**\*\*Rio de Janeiro-January 17\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554\*\***

The man known as Rookie collapses into his chair and releases an explosive sigh as he rubs his eyes.

"What a day," he mutters to himself.

Today his security team has been pulling double shifts and at the request of the Ambassador, they had to work with some of the Sangheili guards to signify their species alliance, an impossible feat considering both people still has deep grudges against one another.

Rookie spent most of the day breaking up would be fights and had to cool his team's temper as they were insulted throughout the day.

He sighs as he twists his seat around and gazes outside. The city shines brightly in greeting, the urban sprawl spreads out for miles around, but every so often there is a space here and there allowing some vegetation to grow, creating a balance of sorts between the works of men and the works of nature.

The beauty of the metropolis is what made Earth leaders decide this place was as good as any to build the embassy, that way the Sangheilis will be able to see human civilization on one hand and the works of nature on the other. However, that was before the urban center fell into hard times. Between ration shortages, lack of living spaces and the wide spread of diseases, the city wonder has been reduce to its knees. The only comforting thing about this is the fact that there isn't any other human cities doing any better than they are, at least Rio is still surround in its beautiful abundant rainforests.

Movement captures his eyes as he looks down from his second story position. Right below him at the closed gates a small group of protesters are starting to gather and begins throwing trash at the building.

The Lieutenant sighs once more before he touches his ear piece and says, "Smyth."

"Yeah Rook," a rough voice responds.

"Hippies, primary gate," is all that the Rookie says.

"Roger, we're on it."

Rookie looks down and watches what transpire. The small mob are still chucking garbage at the embassy when the door at the rear of the building opens and out files a dozen security guards in riot gear. As always the security team orders the people home. Almost like a routine the people start to insult the team, "Split-lip lovers," "traitors," and "government pigs." When they don't disperse, the team moves in and uses their shields to push them on their way, this almost always work. Almost, Rookie remembers last month when a boy, who was full of zealous, rushed forward and buried a knife in one of Rook's men's leg. The guard survived, but he was furious at being taken down.

"Those idiots," Rookie mutters to himself as the protesters finally start to leave. Don't they understand? Humanity needs this alliance, Rook isn't too fond of it either, but it's either an alliance or war. And he has seen war's true color, those stoners hadn't. If they're so confident humanity can win in a war against Sanghelios, why don't they volunteer for service while the Covenant war veterans watch, let's see how they cope in a war.

He turns away from the window and pushes himself towards his desk. It's quite plain, made of plastic and colored grey, the only things on the desk is a lamp and Rook's data pad. The Lieutenant doesn't believe in decorations, it has been his experience that if it's not important, then it shouldn't be there.

However he sometimes he wonders about getting a frame for his one and only picture of his family, but then what? Display it for the world to see? Rook prefers to keep all personal information to himself, it's all he has left of his past life and he doesn't want it to be strip away from him.

He reaches for his pad and activates it. He instantly goes to the news network and sees what's the situation is like in the northern hemisphere. It's not good. Moscow, Quebec, Juno and countless other cities are under siege by Covenant forces. Almost out of instinct, Rook looks up at the skies but it looks as gorgeous as ever with the afternoon sun lightly beating down on the city.

He returns his gaze to the pad and continues to read. Though the Covenant isn't as strong as they were a year ago, the Brutes, the current dominate race of the Covenant, are attacking bluntly and savagely. The UNSC was caught completely off guard by the sudden invasion force, even as Rook reads the report, the UNSC Navy is combating against the Covenant ships in the upper atmosphere, keeping them away from the ground, but that doesn't stop the landing parties of the Covenant army from dropping to Earth.

They are now entering the second week of combat and more Marines are being poured in, from the new kids just out of basics to the battered veteran ODSTs.

Rook's eyes linger on the acronym. He shouldn't have accepted the promotion from Hood, but it's not like he had a choice. When Hood said Platoon leader, Rook thought he meant for another team of troopers, not the head security chief of the southern Sanghelios Embassy.

He wonders what Buck or the rest of the guys are doing. They're probably heading out to the front lines. At that thought he opens his inbox. Sure enough there's a message from Taylor, or "Dutch" as he is called among the team.

\_Heading out, can't say where, just somewhere coldâ€¦in the north...won't be able to talk, see you soon.\_

Dutch, Buck and Mickey have been sending him messages almost every week. He stopped reading the ones from Romeo, all of his are full of details of them going on dangerous ops and full of wise cracks about how he envisions life behind a desk. Rook barely sees them anymore; despite that, Buck had just invited him to his wedding next month. Though honored, Rook has been thinking about declining the offer, big parties just weren't his thing, but now it looks like he has to wait a few months until Buck gets back to read his reply.

Suddenly the pad dings and a new message appears under the name of "Boss."

This gets a raised eyebrow from Rookie, why would the Ambassador be



messaging him? As far as he knows, nothing bad has gone amissâ€|any that he knows of.

He clicks the 'open' button and reads the brief message.

\_My office. Now.\_

This can't be good. Rook barley rises out of his chair when the pading again. He checks it and sees another message, this time from Sophie, a secretary who lets him know if there's anything wrong.

The message is far from troublesome, but not for Rookie.

\_New Sangheili waiting here; says you're its new protectee.\_

Its, Rookie dully notices. Sophie is one of the humans who works in the embassy, but who also has a grudge against the Sangheilis and any other species that isn't human. Despite this though, she fulfils her duties, like letting him know of his new "bodyguard."

Rook finds the whole thing ridiculous, but he doesn't dare voice it, especially in front of the Arbiter who was the one that gave him the guard. The most exciting thing that happened at the embassy was when an angry protester snuck up to the Arbiter and actually tried to shoot him a few months ago. Rook saw the movements and moved to intercept, but was too late when the trigger was pulled. So instead he jumped in front of the Sangheili and took the blast for him. The bullet hit him in the gut, but he remain standing long enough to shoot back, nailing the man in the head before Rook passed out.

When he awoke in the medical wing, he felt like a fool when a chuckling security guard informs Rook that the Arbiter had his shields activated, so there was really no threat. However, Arbiter stopped by to see Rook, which surprised him greatly. Arbiter then told him though his shields was on, he was still grateful nevertheless for what the Rookie has done for him, praising him as an honorable warrior which causes Rook, who guiltily admitted to Buck one day, to swell with pride.

However, he was quickly deflated at Arbiter's next words. As a gift of sorts and in a way to return the favor, Arbiter proclaims from that day forward, Rookie will have a bodyguard of his own who will protect him and ensure he will have a long lasting life for years to come.

This has been a running gag among the security officers for months now; a bodyguard with his own bodyguard.

Rook talked to the Ambassador about it, but considering the alliance between the two species is still delicate, the humans wishes not to do anything that may insult the Sangheilis, so whether he likes it or not, Rookie is stuck with an alien for the rest of his life, who will shadow him at work to his very home. A major shock to someone of Rookie's background who doesn't have any friends; save for his comrades from Buck's team.

His first bodyguard was a Sangheili by the name of Kunar, a rather tactless person who invaded Rookies privacy. The Sangheili is always causing disturbances, at Rookie's work and at his apartment complex. He was also grouchy, moody and displayed open hostilities towards

Rook. Finally Rookie cracked and demanded that the Ambassador talks to Arbiter, if he can't remove his bodyguard decree or whatever it is that the Arbiter did, the least he could do was find a replacement for Kunar.

Now it looks like that replacement has arrived. Rookie sighs as he heads out the door, he might as well pick up the Sangheili while he is en route to the ambassadors office. Hopefully this bodyguard isn't as hostile as the last one.

\* \* \*

><p>Rila is excited, no nervous, excited; she couldn't really tell.<p>

It takes all of her restraints not to jump up and down in excitement. She keeps mumbling to herself that she is now a Sangheili adult and should carry herself with pride. Yet at the moment she feels as if excitement is the thing carrying her.

She has been dreaming of this, to explore the stars and get some adventure in the process. Though she has been told there are few and little scuffles here on Earth, the fact that she may finally see some combat electrifies her.

The invasion of the Covenant in the north also fuels her spirit as well.

She rocks herself a little on her feet as her gaze continues to search the room. It looks nice, clean, but what catches her attention is the fact that it's entirely alien. The strange wooden floor, the plastic like walls and the strange decorations that adorn the circular room is all so different compared to the materials used on Sanghelios.

She looks back at the other female that is occupying the room. She is seated behind a desk and appears to be working on some odd monitor, clicking in commands on a board that is lying in front of her at extraordinary speed. She appears to be almost an elder, her tired and lined face reveals that much, but Rila also notes with amazement that her head is comprised of black and grey fur and she appears to be wearing some sort of charm around her neck.

Rila considers walking over and asking the female some questions, aside from their greeting they exchanged earlier, she didn't say anything. However that idea dies when the female finally glances up at Rila. The Sangheili offers her a warm smile but is surprised when the human's eyes harden before looking back at her work. Surprised and slightly hurt from this unprovoked gesture, Rila continues to look around the room, observing whatever strikes her fancy.

"Sophie."

"Afternoon Rook."

Rila turns her head and sees a male coming out of one of the hallways. He is tall by human standards she guesses, but he is still shorter than her. She couldn't help but grin; this is what she likes about Earth, for once she is taller than almost everybody. The male is

wearing some sort of light body armor over a blue shirt, has a weapon on his hip and is wearing a black cloth that is wrapped around each of his legs. She also notes that his footwear seems to be shining as well.

The male's expression is solemn. He walks and stands with tension obvious in his movements. His eyes are dark at the moment, making it hard for her to see and the fur on his head is a light brown as well. His face gives nothing away, but if she has to guess, he is an adult much older in summers than she is. She has no idea why, but it's as if this human's very presence demands that she gives him her direct attention.

The female, who she assumes is Sophie, points a finger in Rila's direction. The warrior looks in her direction and immediately her exhilaration dies. Did she do something wrong, why was she being pointed out to a capable warrior?

She feels herself tense when the warrior walks towards her. She feels like reaching down and grabbing her plasma rifle, but she is only allowed to do that if she is in imminent danger and if it's absolutely necessary.

The human stands before her and looks her body over. Normally she would feel rather protective of herself if a male looks at her in such a manner, but this human doesn't appear to be too focusing on her body as far as she can tell.

Rookie looks his new bodyguard over and couldn't help but feel that there's something different about this one.

Its armor is blue, which is that of a minor, a contrast to Kunar's silver color rank. It doesn't carry an energy sword, only a plasma rifle, pistol and a few grenades. The emblem on its shoulder shows something that looks like a sun with four slashes crisscrossing over it with a tint of green added in. Aside from that, the only other thing that is different is the body, it's smaller compared to other Sangheilis, reaching about six foot eleven status, almost seven foot tall. And the body there's like a blue hue radiating off of it, while the limbs are slimmer, he also notices the hips and legs are a lot curvier as well.

Is it even possible? Could this Sangheili be?

Finally he takes a deep breath and asks, "Are you my new guard?"

His voice is low and at the last word sound like he is in pain. Rila however decides its best to answer the question so she nods.

The human appears to be in deep thought before asking, "What's your name?"

Rila holds her head up high as she announces her family name, "my name is Rila, Rila Sa'u."

Rookie notices her voice is different as well; most Sangheilis voices are rough and sound like they chew on the words before spitting it out. However this Sangheili, Rila he remembers, voice is softer and smoother in nature.

Being tactful has never been Rook's strong suit, so he just asks, "Are you a woman?"

Rila feels startled at this. Don't these humans know she is a female? Is she the first Sangheili female these people have ever seen? She suddenly becomes nervous and looks down. The males of her species does not approve her being placed in the way of battle and does not accept her as a fellow warrior. Will this human treat her the same way?

With her eyes still downcast, she nods in confirmation.

There is a silence before he says, "I'm needed in the Ambassadors office, I guess you should come too."

She looks up, startled that he said nothing about her gender. Instead he turns and starts walking down another hallway to his left.

Rila is quick to follow but pauses and turns to the stoic female and says, "Farewellâ€¦Sophie."

The human gives her another hard look so Rila turns and quickly follows the maleâ€¦her new charge.

\_Sophie is not going to be happy about that\_, Rookie thinks before turning his mind back to the Sangheili following close behind. She, and he was calling her it most of the time, is quite different from Kunar. Kunar slouched, glares at everything and pretty much tries to ignore the fact that he is surrounded by humanity. Rila however looks like she isâ€¦bouncing? Sure enough when he looks back, Rila looks extremely thrilled. She keeps one eye on Rook, but the other is busy looking at everything and everyone. As they pass a janitor, she happily greeted him, only to receive a shock look from the man.

Rook doesn't blame him, this is probably the first and only friendly Sangheili in history at the moment, even the Arbiter isn't this pleasant.

"Excuse me sir," Rila suddenly asks, putting some focus on him, not all of it considering she is still glancing around.

"Yes?" he responds.

"What's your name?"

Rook stops, which was a bad idea because Rila bumps into him and almost runs him over before Rook is able to regain his footing.

He looks back at the Sangheili who looks embarrassed at the moment as he asks, "they didn't tell you my name?"

She shrugs in answer, "Kunar just told me to ask you and you'll tell me."

Kunar, Rook wants to cuss out the alien, but with Rila there he is sure she'll be offended by the foul language he will utter. So instead he thinks darkly of his former guard, Kunar never asked Rook for his name nor does he seem to care.

He finally sighs and says, "Rookie."

"Rookie?" she asks in a confused voice, "I've never heard a name like that before."

He shrugs, "that's what people call me; you can call me Rookie, Rook, or sir if you like."

"Alright," she says and beams at him.

Slightly unnerved, Rook continues walking, unsure of what to think of his new Sangheili companion when a question wanders into his mind.

"Rila," he finally say, "What else did Kunar tell you?"

The female beams again as she replies, "He said you are very talkative, likeable and a amusing person."

Rook tries not to allow his own growl out, looks like Kunar gave Rila the wrong idea about him.

"Well I'm not so sure he was being serious," she admits to Rook's relief, "but I hope that doesn't mean we can't be friends."

Friendsâ€|.

Rookie turns around and says sternly, "Listen, I know you're excited and all, but we are not friends, we are associates, that's all. I don't know about you, but I didn't join the military to make friends, I joined to fight and I suggest you do the same. If you try and make companions out here in a battlefield then you'll truly understand what it means to be broken as you watch them die in front of your eyes, understood?"

Rila is silent for a few moments before lowering her head and says, "Yesâ€|sir."

\* \* \*

><p>Rila remains silent for the rest of the journey until they finally reach the elevator and begin to ascend to the tenth floor. She is no longer looking around in enthusiasm or smiling and for some reason, this just leaves a cold and guilty feeling in Rook.<p>

Finally while they wait to arrive at their destination, he couldn't take the emotion anymore and says, "Sorry."

"Huh?" she asks and turns her head to look at him.

He takes a deep breath, feeling like he is in an unknown territory as he mumbles, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound cruelâ€|I just don't have a lot of friends so when you said thatâ€|I guess I kind of lost it."

"Lost what?" she questions as she peers at him curiously.

"My senses I guess" he said with a shrug, "I've justâ€|keep losing

them so I just stop making someâ€¦"

Great, now he sounds like a heartbroken twerp. He wonders how he can amend his steel appearance when Rila speaks.

"I am sorry to hear that Rookie," it's strange to hear her call him that in a serious tone, "I've never been in combat before, so I guess I wouldn't know."

He eyes her considerably before sighing, "So does this mean you don't hate me anymore?"

She turns to him with a look of surprise in her eyes, "I never hated you Rookieâ€¦I was a little sad thinking you would be like this for as long as we're together."

Rookie chuckles lightly, "Please don't say that, you make us sound like we're a married couple," he sees her still looking confused so he says; "you make us sound like we're mates."

Her eyes widen as she says, "I didn't mean to make you sound like such...you are surly desirable Rookie," Rook feels his face flush as he looks at the alien beside him. Her eyes are now huge as she stutters, "I-I-what I meant was that you are desirable by human standers, but no sane Sangheili would ever take you as a mate."

His eyebrow arches at this.

"No! I mean you are desirable by both species," she says sounding more and more flustered by the second, "Not that I find you desirable, we've just met, I'm sure any other Sangheili women would love to mate with you-Not that I'm saying I wouldn't- No! I would never mate with you-I-I-I mean-"

Rookie just starts laughing, he couldn't help it. This is the most embarrassing sex talk that he has been a part of, considering its about him, but seeing Rila looking so distressed is hilarious. Soon Rila starts to laugh with him; her strong yet hearty chuckles were so alien and strange that it just made Rook double over. They are both laughing so hard it isn't long before they are wheezing for air when the doors finally open. Still chuckling, Rookie leads the way out, with a still self-conscious Rila following close behind.

Silence envelopes them again, but unlike before, this one is comforting and relaxing.

"What's this?" Rookie turns to see what Rila is referring to. She is looking intently at a rather colorful urn with a flowery design decorating it.

"It's a vase," she gives him a vacant look before he says; "basically a fancy flower holder used more for decorations than anything else."

"Where's the flowers?" she questions and peers inside the urn like a small curious child.

Rookie just smirks, "I don't know, that's something you need to ask the designer I guess," with that he turns and starts walking again.

The Ambassador's office is a few feet away and yet in that small amount of space Rila somehow finds something to question for every centimeter they took.

"Why is the light hanging so low?"

"What is powering this device?"

"What is the floor made of?"

"What's this?"

"What's that?"

"Why does that male smell wired?"

Rookie never been so relieved in his life when they reach their destination; a set of double doors that is being protected by two of his security guards. They eyed Rila suspiciously but Rook signals them to stand down as he approaches the doors. He pauses when he hears footfalls close to him and turns to face Rila.

"Rila, this is official business, I'm going to ask you to stay out here, ok?" he can see disappointment in her eyes but she nods anyways. Then Rookie did something he couldn't understand, he smiled at her before entering the room.

\* \* \*

><p>Rila falls back to her old routine, standing still against the wall with the other guardsmen as she waits for Rookie to return.<p>

However her youth starts to show as she soon loses focus and starts observing the room and the people walking to and fro. Occasionally a fellow Sangheili will walk by and she is happy to say hello in her native language, but aside from the return of her greeting, they pretty much remain silent and continued on their way, as did everyone else.

Twice she tries to pull the human guards into a conversation, but twice they refused and only look at her occasionally.

"By the forerunners" Rila finally mutters under her breath in Sangheili, "how can things here be so dull?"

"This isn't the battlefield young one," a familiar voice says behind her, "here people actually work."

Rila spins around and smiles at the delightful surprise, "sister!" she cries.

Standing a few feet away from Rila is her sister, Fali. Fali, like Rila, chose to help strengthen the alliance between the humans and Sangheili, but both chose different paths. Rila chose the path of a warrior, to her family's disapproval, while Fali became a diplomat. She looks as noble as any woman can come, tall, strong and beautiful; the polar opposite to Rila, but despite this, the two sisters are close to one another.

Rila steps forward to greet her, ignoring her sister's Sangheili body guards who gave censorious looks at the female dressed as a warrior.

"Fali," Rila says as she bows slightly before her older sibling, "what are you doing here? Weren't you on Sangheilos? What's it like back home? How's mother? How's Uncle Lax'e? What-"

Fali presses a hand against one side of Rila's mandibles and folds it shut, causing her other jaws to close. Fali sighs, "Ahâ€|blissful silence," she teases.

Rila shakes her sister's hand off and releases an annoyed growl. Her sister merely giggles as she points further down the hall she has just come from, "I wish to speak to you sister, in private."

Rila becomes serious as she indicates the doors behind her, "I can't; Iâ€|I just started..."

Fali eyes widen as she says, "Ah, I should have known it was you who volunteered to baby a human."

Rila grunts, "and I take it you like to be babied sister?" she asks as she gestures at the two large guards on either side of her.

The two sisters share another laugh before Fali says, "I'm sure you're human is safe, these two will most certainly protect him for the time being."

The pair of human guards stared at the small group of Sangheili. They can't understand their language, but they knew by the way they are looking and waving towards them that they are speaking about them.

Rila considers for a moment before nodding in answer. Fali smiles as she leads the way down the hall with the two Sangheili sentinels walking close behind them. Now they are silent as they stroll through the corridor until Fali opens a door and motions for Rila to enter while she orders her guards to stay outside.

Rila looks around the room in interest. It's a blend of Sangheili antiques and human architect. There is a Sangheili bed in the corner, furniture in the middle and a dining table to the left. The windows offers a good view of the human city and the mountain with the giant statue of a man with his arms held open.

After she takes the room in, Rila moves to the window and peers out. In the street she can see humans in their strange vehicles driving this way and that. Meanwhile even more humans crowd the walkways on either side of the road as they head off into different directions. As she watches, the single sun begins to set and the multiple lights on the road and in the city begins to lights up. She watches in awe as the tall buildings switches on its lights, casting a beautiful reflection in the water.

"Beautiful sight is it not sister?" comments Fali as she joins Rila at the window.

"It's majestic," agrees Rila when she notices out of the corner of



her eye that the huge statue is now washed in a large shower of light. She points out the large sculpture, "who is that supposed to be? A great warrior?"

Fali follows her gaze and shakes her head, "I forgotten the name, but that is suppose to be the statue of their God's son who walked among them a long time ago."

"Really?" Rila asks as she squints at the figure for more details.

"Ask your human companion, I'm sure he knows his culture better than I," Fali said.

Remembering she now has an important task on hand, Rila turns to her sister and asks, "what is it you wish to speak of Fali?"

Fali appears to be in deep thought before finally she turns to Rila and says, "I just want you to be careful."

Rila tilts her head, not really understanding.

Fali sighs as she starts to speak, "The humans are complicated creatures, all of them are of different minds and opinions, and none are truly united."

"Just like us," chimes in Rila as she remembers the occasional Keep war that happens on Sanghelios.

Fali shakes her head, "You don't understand, they can be strongly committed."

"Committed to what?" questions Rila.

"Whatever it is that their minds deem important," here she looks at her sister, "and right now they see us Sangheilis as a threat and may take action against us."

"But we're allies-" Rila tries to counter.

"Like I said, they are independent creatures," continues Fali, "I hear that there may be a human civil war over this, whether they want an alliance with the Sangheili people or not."

"But we apologized, doesn't that make thing up?" questions Rila.

Fali shakes her head, whether in conflict or embarrassment of her sister naïve nature she doesn't know, "We killed millions of them sister, billions even, men, women, and children, families, most of whom were burned alive."

Rila flinches at the image in her mind before she asks, "Why are you telling me this?"

"I'm, telling you this as a warning," her sister continues, "be cautious around humans, many of them seek revenge and they are willing to kill," here she looks at her, "especially the ones who have been trained in combat."

It takes a while before Rila eventually sees what her sister is saying, "You think my charge mayâ€|kill me?" she asks in a small voice, unable to believe that the human she had laughed with would do such a thing. But then she remembers how cold he acted after they first met, how he didn't speak to her and how he berated her that they won't be friends.

Her breathing becomes hitch as she thinks about it. His well-toned muscles, the way he scans the room, the way he walks, the fact that he is armed; he is a warrior, one who looks as if he has already killed and may be ready to do it again.

Fali sees the worry and fear on her sister's face and instantly regrets telling her sister such horrid things. She thinks a moment before speaking again.

"I hear your charge saved the Arbiter's life, is that true?"

Rila gulps a couple times before answering quietly, "yes."

Fali lays an arm on her sister's and says, "They say the male is honorable and devoted to our cause, if this is true, then you have nothing to fear."

Rila thinks for a moment before saying, "I hope he is, he's just been soâ€|quiet."

"Quiet?" asks her amused sister, "so he doesn't answer your questions?"

Rila shifts around a bit before saying, "he does."

"Then he's not that silent," she teases and feels happy when she sees her sister smile as well at her jib.

Silence soon befalls them until Rila speaks, "why are you here sister? I thought you were helping the humans on Sanghelios."

Fali nods her head, "I was, but they decided a female here may help the bond between our people." She then remembers her other questions so she next says, "Mother and Uncle Lax'e are doing well, they are keeping themselves busy by helping with the younglings and Sanghelios is fine, but the summer is blistery hot, and it's no better here apparently."

Rila giggles a bit, "True," she said, "But I find Earth exotic, it's so different from Sanghelios, the people, the plants, the buildings, even the stars looks different," at that she looks up at the night sky where a few sparkling diamonds just begins to reveal themselves.

Fali nods her head in agreement, "It's nice" she agrees, "but do you know what this planet is missing?"

"What?" asks a curious Rila.

"Males," her sister says lowly. This causes Rila to laugh, but she actually became embarrassed when she remembers the conversation she had with Rookie in theâ€|elevator she believes it is called. She decides not to tell her sister of the incident, she might get the

wrong idea.

"Any particular male in mind?" Rila questions but knows the answer. Her sister is currently being courted by a warrior from the Xernxs Keep.

She can see Fali becoming uncomfortable as well as she look away and mumbles, "maybe."

Rila laughs once more at her sister's antics before Fali asks, "and you my sister? Any males cross your mind recently?"

Rila instantly feels her mood becomes sadden as she looks down, "Noâ€|what male could possible want me?"

Rila is small for her age, which many have found amusingly strange. She may be young now, but she should have grown a couple more units, and now she is smaller than most Sangheilis. She is also quite talkative as most people say, however she once overheard some males saying that she is annoying. She has elegant robes but unlike her sister she has no graceful beauty, a fact that many would-be suitors keeps telling her. With really no other option, she became part of the home guard of her keep, but when she heard of an assignment open to anyone on Earth, she immediately took it. Now here she is on the alien planet, alone.

Rila feels someone nuzzling her neck and looks up just as her sister pulls back and says, "don't worry young one, you're just too good for most males on our world."

Rila smiles a little but looks away. She doesn't care if her suitor is handsome, fit or a warrior, she just wants someone who care for her just as Fali's suitor cares for her.

"What is it that your charge is doing anyway?" Fali asks in an attempt to lighten the attitude of the conversation.

Rila shakes her head, "I don't know, he just said it is official business."

\* \* \*

><p>"What?" Rookie questions; too stun to really believe what he has just heard.<p>

The Ambassador, a rather elderly white haired, broad shoulder man who was built like a rugby player nods his head in confirmation.

"You're heading back to active duty chief, you're going to be a platoon leader, a real one," he says with a light smile at the end.

Rook still couldn't believe. He was just thinking about what it would be like to be back on the front line, and now he's being told its going to come true. He has been hoping and praying sometimes to go back to war; most people found that odd, others think he just wants to be a hero, but that's not the case. Just as some people were born to be athletes, he was born to be a fighter. It's in his blood, he doesn't feel comfortable unless there's a rifle in his hand, doesn't feel thrilled unless he is in a SOEIV drop pod and he feels like he's

with the best people alive as he works with them on the field of war.

He feels his body getting hyped up at the prospect of wearing his ODS combat armor again. The thought of getting his boots dirty again is almost a hard concept to grasp. He was going back.

However he takes a minute to ponder, he looks down at his shoes as he sits in his chair while the Ambassador sits in front of him behind his desk. Finally Rookie looks up and says, "Sir, things are bad up north aren't they?"

The Ambassador nods his head wearily, "Yes, in fact, it's getting worse."

He gets up and walks to a map of the world that is hanging on the right wall. The Ambassador takes a marker and draws a line between the artic and the rest of the world.

"This was where the Covenant was for the first few days," the ambassador says.

Now he draws a line that takes up a great portion of the continents of North American and Europe, "This was where they were last week."

He sighs as he draws another line, this one taking over most of the bulk of Europe and North America, "and this is where they are now."

Rookie swallows slowly. The Covenant doesn't have enough ships to glass the planet, but that doesn't mean they can't destroy it. Looks like the Brutes were serious when they said they'll tear the human's world apart with their bare hands.

The Ambassador looks like he has aged a couple of years when he looks back at Rook and says, "I've read your files, you survived the worst battles of the war; Luna, Reach, and New Mombasa, if you were taller, I would have mistaken you for a Spartan," he finishes with a smile.

Rook smiles in return before looking back at the map as he asks, "And Smyth will be the new chief?"

The ambassador nods, "correct."

Rook looks up and says, "When do I meet the platoon?"

The Ambassador smiles, "Tomorrow, at the airfield you will be taken to the UNSC \_Shanghai, \_once on board you will get your platoon and from there it's all up to the Corps to decide where you will go."

Rookie stands, "I think it's best if I head home and get some rest then."

The other man nods gravely, "you're going to need it."

Rookie turns on his heel and was about to leave when he pauses and looks back at the Ambassador, "Sir, will Rila be quartered with the other Sangheili guards?"

"Rila?" The Ambassador asks, his brow furrowing in confusion.

"My bodyguard," Rook clarifies, "She just arrived today."

"She?" he asks again looking startled.

Impatiently Rookie nods, "Yes, she, and where will \_she \_be quartered sir?"

The Ambassador thinks for a moment before saying, "With you I suppose."

There is silence in the room until Rookie says, "That's not funny sir."

"I'm serious Rook," The Ambassador, "It's a life debt, when the Arbiter said your guard will be going everywhere you go he means \_everywhere\_."

"So she'll be coming with me into battle?" he asks.

The Ambassador nods.

"Sir, that's not a good idea," Rook tries to explain, "She's young, inexperience, and the ODSs are the best of the best and we work by a whole different set of rules compared to other military branches."

"I know," the Ambassador said, "I can't remember the exact numbers of ODSs I've met who said the same thing, but the fact remains, unless you wish to disrespect the Arbiter for his generosity, than this Sangheili is going into war with you, whether you like it or not."

There is silence once again before Rookie say, "This sucks," with that he exits out of the office without saying good bye to the Ambassador.

Rookie stands outside the office and releases a held in breath. Looks like he's heading into war with luggage; he never had luggage before.

As he looks up he realizes that the female he is thinking about isn't presence.

He turns to one of the sentries, "Where is the Sangheili that accompanied me here?"

The guard points to the left, "She went that way with another Sangheili, a diplomat from the looks of it."

Rookie hopes this isn't going to happen in the battlefield, he being somewhere while the one who's supposed to be watching over him wanders off.

"Thanks," he grunts to the guard before walking down the indicated passage. He notices that this is the living quarters for essential Sangheili personnel; this makes him feel as if he is stumbling onto private property.

He has no idea which room Rila could be in, but he then sees a pair of Sangheili sentinels standing watch over a particular door, he might as well ask.

The Sangheilis look at Rookie as he approaches and he couldn't help but tense. The war is over and they are allies now, but he doesn't know if he'll ever fully trust these aliens, including Rila; this could be a problem for them and his platoon if they can't fully trust each other.

He approaches the nearest guard and asks, "Have you seen a female Sangheili almost my height and wearing blue body armor?"

The Sangheili nods its head, probably thinking it could avoid talking to the human.

"Where?" Rookie demands.

The Sangheili gestures to the door.

"Could you go get her, we need to go," Rook says rather sternly.

The two Sangheilis turn to one another and mumble together in thier language, resulting with the both of them glancing at Rook and laughing.

Rook crosses his arms and says, "Will you get a move on, we're in a hurry."

The Sangheili he spoke to snarls before opening the door part way and says something in Sangheili. Rookie really should try and make an effort to learn their native tongue.

When the guard finishes speaking there is a loud thumping noise, a crash and the sound of falling furniture. Both Rook and the second guard tries to peer in to see what is happening when Rila appears in the door, breathing hard and looking worried.

Rook looks over her shoulder and sees a mess made in a perfect line; it looks like Rila was on the other side of the room and rushed over when he asked for her, leaving behind a overturn table and chair.

"Rookie," she finally says with a puff, "I apologize for my absence, I didn't mean to leave, I just thought you were occupied and-"

Rook holds up his hand, "Forget it Rila, we have far more worse things to talk about."

He notices her mandibles are starting to quiver a bit and her hands are starting to fumble with one another.

"You didn't do anything wrong," Rook says and he can see the relief in her eyes before he says, "'I've been summon back to duty in the UNSC and ordered to the fight in the northâ€and since we're stuck together that means you're coming too."

Her eyes widen, but before she could say anything he heard a loud voice say, "What!"

Rooks looks over Rila's shoulder again and now notices another Sangheili in a flowery robe behind her. The Sangheili looks about the same height as that of its species, which is seven feet, but he notes the high pitch voice and colorful garmen; this must be another female, one who he has never seen before.

He unconsciously compares the two alien females; Rila is shorter, leaner and of course is ready for combat compared to the other.

Rila turns back to the female inside and they both spoke rapidly to each other, using their hands and making a lot of gestures. Rookie couldn't understand what they are saying, but he's pretty sure he can paint an idea with what is happening. The robed female seems to be arguing about Rila since most of the gestures were aimed at her while Rila seems to be defending herself and is gesturing at her weapons belt. If Rook has to guess, this female is connected to Rila somehow and seems to care for her wellbeing; like a mother towards a child.

Finally Rila ends the conversation and points out Rook. The female fixes a glare on him and he feels himself stiffen. Somehow he got involved and the female doesn't like it.

The said female seems to march to Rook and he feels his body loosen as if it's getting ready for a fight before the female halts and stands in front of the human.

She scowls at him for a while before saying, "Since you are the one taking her into battle, she is your responsibility to care for."

"Sister!" Rila finally says, "I'm a fully grown woman-"

The female who Rila has identified as her sister turns and barks at her, "Barely! You became a woman just a summer ago."

The two Sangheili sentinels seem to chuckle at this as Rila lowers her head in what Rookie takes for either embarrassment or shame.

Rook suddenly feels an urge to defend her, but before he got the chance the sister turns back to him and says, "You're the reason why she is going human, a young who hasn't even been in combat yet, so you are to care for her."

Rook frowns, "Wait a minute," he says, "She's my bodyguard, so surly she knows how to-"

"Keep her safe," the sister snarls at him, "promise me you will keep her safe."

Keep her safe in a war? That's like asking him to keep snow from melting in the Sahara.

"Promise me," Rila's sister said once more.

Rookie looks into her eyes about to make a comeback but was struck dumb. Despite her ferocious nature, the Sangheili's eyes are full of pleading. She is this way because she is afraid and feels protective

over her sibling. Just like him and his little brother beforeâ€¦|

He shakes away the thought and sighs before he looks back at the female sister and says in a near whispered voice, "I promise."

\* \* \*

><p>"What's that?"<p>

"A light post."

"What's that?"

"A fire hydrate."

"What's that?"

Rookie made a hiss of disgust as he bends down and picks up a rock.

"A rat," he says before throwing the stone at the vermin. It misses by a few centimeters, but it was close enough to send the animal scampering away.

Rookie curses lightly, for a trained marksman that was horrible, he hopes he is still a good shot once he gets his hands back on a rifle.

He and Rila are walking the streets of Rio on their way to his apartment. Rook saved enough money to buy a car, but he considers it pointless considering he lives a few blocks away from the embassy and a convenience store where he buys his groceries and orders things from their catalog. Besides, once he is done in the military he hopes to move away to a desolate part of the Earth and live on his own, maybe in a forest or something.

Usually Rook would be back at his pad in about five minutes, but he slowed down considerably so that Rila could have a chance to look around the neighborhood. He wouldn't do stuff like this for other people, but he feels like he should as he remembers the way she looked when she left her sister. He suppose being young is insulting to the Sangheili but he refrains from asking her.

He couldn't help but smile as her enthusiasm as she takes everything in like a puppy. She told him aside from the cities within the keeps, the Sangheili doesn't live in close proximity of one another. Rook wonders how much spare space the Sangheili had, because the humans could sure use it considering that Earth is being forced to accommodate the needs for almost 20 billion people, including the ones living on the colony on Mars.

"That's a nice view," Rila said brining Rookie out of his thoughts. Rila is staring at the Rio skyline as the twilight sets in, casting a beautiful portrait in the water.

Rook also notices that Rila looks surprisingly beautiful at the moment with the twilight back ground. It does feel a little awkward walking with her, but if she was a few inches shorter, he would have put his arm around her and-



He shakes his head, \_what's wrong with you\_, he shouts at his mental state. Probably fatigue from the long surprising day he suspects.

As they walk they occasionally pass a pedestrian who would stare before turning and sprints away. If Rila is bothered by this she doesn't show it. However the occasional car will go by and the driver will honk his or her horn at them.

"Why do they do this?" she finally questions after the twentieth car honks at them.

"We use horns to let the person in front know he or she is moving too slow or just to get their attention," he isn't lying, but he knew that's not the main reason why so many people are doing it.

They heard another honk and Rila comments, "A lot of people seem to be moving slowly."

Rookie could only chuckle and shakes his head.

Finally they are approach the housing complex while Rila asks another one of her questions.

"So you live with other humans?" she asks.

"Sort of," Rook says, "we live in our own separate sections; I have a room on the top floor for instance."

She ponders this for a moment before she asks, "But how do you-"

Suddenly a small projectile flies in from behind and cuts her off. It hits the side of her face, grazing it and causing a thin line of blue blood to be drawn. She grabs a light post for support, stunned by the unforeseen attack.

Rook turns around and spots the offender. Three yards away is a teenager who seems to be pumping his fist in victory.

"Beat it squirt!" an angry Rook calls.

"Make me hinge-head lover!" the adolescent calls back and makes a rude hand gesture.

Rookie reaches into his holster and draws his Magnum pistol, pulling the hammer back as he does so. The boy's eyes widen as he sees Rook draw the weapon before fleeing. Rook levels his pistol, aims it in the middle of the boy's back where he knows the bullet will hit the heart andâ€|stops.

He looks down at his gun, his primed loaded gun, before holstering it. He isn't allowed to shoot civilians, especially kids, but the sudden attack on Rila made it almost instinct for him to defend her. Was it the promise he made earlier the source of it?

Putting that aside, Rookie walks over to Rila to see how she is doing. She is now steady on her feet and has a hand press up against her cheek.

"Are you alright?" he asks as he stands in front of her.

She turns her heads away before saying, "I'm fine."

Rookie doesn't believe her, he tries to move in front of her again but she turns once more.

"Rila" Rook begins, but she shakes her head.

"I'm fine Rookie," she says stubbornly.

Rook however moves forward and places both of his hands on either side of her face. She freezes when he forces her to look into his eyes as he stares back. His gaze locks on to her dark eyes, soon he wonders what color they are before taking in the rest of her features. He could see into her mouth and see the rows of sharpened teeth but oddly enough he isn't afraid. Her skin appears to be grey in nature, but in this light its hard to tell.

He pulls Rila's hand away from her cheek and he looks at it. It's a nice long cut with blue blood still oozing from the breakage, but it doesn't look that bad.

"You're alright," he says softly as he wipes the small stream of blood away with his thumb while his hands continue to hold her head still. He then looks back into her eyes and he is lost. They seem to be deep and thoughtful, yet full of fire and energy. Her skin is smooth yet tough like leather and the twilight does make her look like she has blue skin. He is entranced by her looks, he doesn't know how or why, but he just couldn't move. Rila apparently is experiencing the same feeling, she doesn't move and appears to be taking Rookie's face in.

A car passes by and its honks brought them out of their dream like state. Rook feels Rila's face becoming warm and he senses his own face starting to burn as well as he lets go and looks away.

"Uh, let's just head to the apartment," Rook finally says.

"Ok," she says, her eyes looking a little misty though.

\* \* \*

><p>Mrs. Locker opens the door and just puts her cat out when she looks up and gasps.<p>

Rila stares at the human woman who looks like an elder to her while Rookie opens the door to his apartment. He ushers the Sangheili in before looking at his neighbor and says, "nice night, isn't it Doris?"

Before she could answer, Rookie dashes inside and locks the door.

Doris Locker continues staring at the closed door before turning and runs into her home, screaming her husband's name, "Nathan! Nathan!"

\* \* \*

><p>Rookie stands back as he watches Rila inspect his living

space.<p>

"I know it's not much," Rookie says, "but I call it home."

"I think it's wonderful," Rila says as she looks at Rookie.

Rook arches an eyebrow as he looks around his own living room. It's pretty standard, a sofa, recliner and a small coffee table with a small T.V. screen on it. In the back is his small tiled kitchen with a fridge, microwave, oven, a small pantry, and a counter that separates the living room and kitchen with a small opening to its side. Next to the kitchen is the entrance to his bedroom where the restroom is also located.

He starts moving to his room, he sees Rila's mouth open, but he beats her to it, "I need to deal with some things before we go to bed, you can explore the living space if you want," with that he enters his room, leaving Rila on her own.

Rookie's room has one bed, a desk, a closet and the door that leads to the restroom. He sits at the desk, pulls out a drawer and takes out a data pad. He activates it and starts working through his office inventory. He messages Smyth the important details, codes and his personal address and number in case he needs help with something. He also begins to sort through files, deleting some age old work while also emailing important documents to Smyth.

As he works he hears thumps, bangs and clanging sounds, all originating from his living room. He tries to ignore it, but every so often he hears a noise of disturbance and hopes Rila isn't making a mess.

\* \* \*

><p>Rila sits on the couch, but only remains there for a minute before standing and explores the room. She knocks on the wall and the floor, trying to see if it's made of the same material the embassy is made of.<p>

She gazes at the strange screen on the mini table and wonders what it could be used for. There are controls on the bottom, which she carefully presses using her talon. She jumps when moving images suddenly appears on the screen and they begin speaking in a language she couldn't understand. Unsure what the thing could be for, she just presses the same button and it switches off, leaving her quite baffled.

She then explores the kitchen area where he said there is food. She opens a small door and is surprised when there are strange packages inside, all containing what she takes to be the sustenance. She reaches in and pulls out a small see-through box and opens it. Inside is what appears to be meat, but it has been blended in with something else and reeks of a strange scent. Cautiously she licks the entire top of the meat and gags at the taste. She looks back inside and finds what appears to be silver paper. Curious she unwrap it and finds what appears to be meat, still attach to the bone. It's covered in something red, but when she nibbles off a bit, she finds it to her liking and quickly devours the cuisine.

Sometime later, Rookie reenters the room and walks towards her just

as she places the last bone down. She hopes he isn't angry that she ate all the meat, instead he asks, "Are you full?"

She peers at him strangely before he asks, "Are you no longer hungry?"

Understanding fully now she nods her head and smiles at him.

He smiles back and notices the open container holding the funny tasting meat. Her eyes widen when she sees him take a scoop.

"Wait," she says but he already takes a bite.

He looks at her strangely and asks, "What?"

She stares at him for a while before looking away and says, "uhâ€|never mind."

Rookie gives her another odd face before continuing to eat the meat. She wishes to question him about his home but her mandibles open and releases a yawn.

Upon seeing the action, Rookie asks, "Do you want to lie down now?"

Rila nods lazily, "That would be nice," she admits.

Rookie thinks for a moment and glances at the couch. When Kunar was here, Rook made him sleep on the furniture, he didn't want to do that to Rila though, she has been kind and nice to him (despite making him speak more than he's used to.)

He thinks for a bit before finally saying, "Come with me."

He leads her to his room and gestures to his bed.

"You can sleep here tonight," he tells her.

Her eyes look at the bed suspiciously, Rook is sure she would have question where he was going to sleep, instead she just yawns and sits on the bed and slowly takes her armor off.

Rookie makes ready to leave but he pauses and stares at Rila. Her cut looks alright now; maybe Sangheilis heal faster than humans. He soon focuses on her lean body, her greyish blue skin, her dark eyesâ€|he suddenly realizes she isn't wearing anything beneath her amour, no clothes at all, not even undergarments. His face flushes, badly.

She suddenly looks up at him as she is about to remove her chest piece, bringing Rook out of his trance.

Rook just says, "good night" and rushes out, but not before grabbing his data pad and closing the door slightly.

He breathes heavily, wondering what made him act like that before walking to his living room. He pauses to grab what's left of the meatloaf out of its container and walks to his couch. He sits down and slowly eats the rest of his dinner as he continues to go through some old files, mailing advice to Smyth every so often.

As he works, the back of his mind is alive with activity, thinking about the day's events. Yet what stands out in his mind the most was the feeling he felt as he touched the skin of an alien, remembering how she looked beautiful against the night sky and the fact that she isn't wearing any clothes...at all...in his room...in his bed.

Rookie turns the tablet off, rubs his eyes and mumbles, "what's wrong with me?"

\*\*Ok, how am I doing, I'm trying to make Rookie a strong stoic silent soldier, but I'm not sure if I got that right in this chapter. Anyway please review what you think and thanks for reading. \*\*

### 3. The Bond

\*\*The Bond\*\*

Rook groans as he lifts himself up from the couch and rubs his eyes. He blinks in wonder, why is he here and not his room? It is then that the memories flow back and he moans again as he holds his head in his hands.

He can't tell if he is excited or terrified. He is finally going back into the field where he belongs, but now he is bringing an inexperienced bodyguard with him who, ironically, is supposed to be protecting him. And to top it all off he made it worse by making the impossible promise of keeping her alive.

He shakes his head, why does he always get stuck in these kinds of situations?

He gets up and enters his kitchen and begins rummaging for breakfast. He was just going to do simple cereal when he remembers his guest. He wonders if he should cook for her, and if so what she would like. He knows the Sangheilis eat meat, but do they eat cooked meat? He remembers Kunar eating his food raw, do Sangheilis prefer their meals this way or did they simply lack a means to cook it when here on Earth?

Rook just shakes his head and decides he might as well try. Besides, a little steak in the morning doesn't sound too bad.

\* \* \*

><p>Rila awakes to the smell of meat. She wonders if she is dreaming, but when she sniffs the air she confirms that the scent is real. She smiles and hopes she'll be able to have some of the meal as she sits up, pushing the blankets off of her in the process.<p>

She then freezes when her eyes adjust to the darkness and begins to look around. She is in an unexplored room that is mostly bare much like the living space in Rookie's home. She sees aside from the bed, the only furniture is what appears to be a small table and three doors, one where the scent of meat is emitting from, one that leads into a smaller room and the last appears to be holding some sort of large box within it. She then notices the bed she is sitting on is small, by Sangheili standards, thankfully though she is small enough to fit in it. However as she swings her legs over the side she notices human clothing thrown to one side of the room while a small

basket is overflowing with other discarded cloth. Curiously, she picks up one of the fabrics and sniffs it. She smells something that reminds her of sea water with a tint of odor that could only belong to a male.

She looks down at the bed she is sitting in before leaning down and sniffs it. She smells the same scent. She shudders as the realization hits her.

\_I'm sleeping in Rookie's room\_; the thought is enough to get her out of the bed as she looks around for the human in question.

She doesn't see him, but she feels bad nevertheless. She growls in frustration, so far she isn't doing a good job at being a guard. She had left her post, was ambushed by a youngling, and now she is sleeping in her charge's bed, probably forcing him to sleep somewhere else.

She pauses at the thought, she remembers before she succumb to sleep that it was Rookie himself who has led her into this room, why did he do this?

She sighs as she begins to pick up her armor pieces off the floor and starts to reattach them to herself. She dully takes notice that her armor is brand new, no signs of dents, blood, or ash, no indication that it has ever been in combat, just like her.

She suddenly remembers what she was told yesterday, one that fills her with excitement. She was to go into battle by Rookie's side, something that she has been dreaming of since she was young. The thought of slaying her enemy, the thrill of rushing into battle, the very prospect is one that she can't fully comprehend. With that in mind, she dresses much more quickly and clips on her weapons before finally placing on her helmet.

She moves to the door but pauses when something catches her eye. Resting on the table is a small piece of paper, but instead of baring words, it has a colorful image. Peering curiously at it, she walks closer to the paper and looks down. It shows a group of humans huddled together in what appears to be some sort of building. She carefully picks it up with the tips of her talons and brings it closer to her so she can view it much more closely.

There are a total of five humans in the image, two females and three males. The two taller males stands in the back, the females stand in front of them and the smallest of the males stood at the very front; all of them with their mouths open in that odd human smile. She leans down further to better inspect the strange paper. She has no idea why, but the two males in the back remind her of someone.

Her eyes widen when she realizes she is staring at Rookie, but he is completely different compared to how he is now. For one thing, his face is fresh without worries and he is smiling, quite more widely than she has ever seen him; this must be how he looked when he was a youngling. The other male standing next to him looks remarkably like her human charge, but she guesses that he must be Rookie's sire, if he was a bit taller and his face wasn't as worn he would have look just like Rookie. She then inspects the younger male and finds the same qualities as Rookie and his supposed father; this must be his brother. Rila finds it remarkable how human offspring's looks exactly

like their parents, especially in this case.

She then observes the two females. One is older, has fur color exactly the same as Rookie's and has a relaxed pose to the way she is standing. The last female however doesn't have any resemblance to the others. She has golden like fur that appears to flow down to her back with a bright smile that appears to be almost glowing. She looks completely different from the group, but Rila notices her hand is being held by Rookie and they both seem to be leaning against one another. Rila wonders who this character is, perhaps the human will tell her.

At the thought she remembers her mission and the sweet aroma of sizzling meat returns to her. She feels her mandibles shiver slightly at the thought of eating her meal as she turns back to the door.

When she opens it, her eyes squints and she allows a hardly audible hiss to escape as she peers into the dazzling room. Nothing appear to have change, but she then notices Rookie is flipping a slab of meat in a strange pan that is position over a machine that is producing a light fire. Rookie, however, does not look up or acknowledging Rila's presence.

Rila stands still for a while as she gazes at Rookie, never before witnessing a male cooking before. Her eyes slowly start to wander over the male's form as she watches. He has excellent muscle tone for a human, his arms and legs appear to be bulging, yet at the same time they appear slim. She sees that his fur is a bit untidy but it looksâ€¦exotic to the young Sangheili. She watches as his hands skillfully remove the meat from the cooking container and starts to cut it with a knife.

\_He is well kept and resourceful\_, she thinks, \_I wonder what he would have been like if he was born Sangheili.\_

It is then that he looks up at her with his dark eyes, bringing her out of her musing.

Rila dips her head respectfully and says, "Greetings Rookie."

The human merely grunt before looking back down as he cuts the meat into smaller pieces, now no longer giving her the slightest of consideration.

\_Have I done something wrong\_, Rila wonders worriedly to herself before looking back down at the image in her hands, \_maybe this will help\_.

"Rookie?" she asks.

He must have heard the hesitation in her voice as he asks, "Yes?" but still doesn't look at her.

She steps forward and holds up the small paper, "What is-"

She didn't finish her sentence, for at that moment the human moves with such unbelievable speed that Rila ponders if she actually seen Rookie move at all. He snatches away the paper and stuffs it into his pocket. He looks at her and she sees malice, true hate in his eyes,

but it disappeared so quickly that Rila isn't sure if she saw it or just simply imagine it.

"That," he says in a heavy voice, "is private."

Rila bows her head again before muttering, "My apologies, I didn't mean to-"

"It's alright," Rookie says just as quickly, "sorryâ€¦I should have been more careful with where I put my things."

Rila is curious with why the human is acting this way, but at that moment he holds out a plate to her with a large slab of meat resting on it.

Her eyes widens and she feels her breath get caught in her throat as she gazes at the food being offered to her.

Rookie notices and asks, in what she takes to be a friendlier tone, "is there something wrong?"

Rila couldn't speak for a moment, feeling embarrassed and imprudent at the same time. Among Sangheilis, to offer a female a meal is seen as a sign of courtship, but this couldn't be the case, Rookie is human, and she is too young and inexperienced to be an option for a warrior like him, at least in her thinking.

Rila doesn't reply as she takes the plate and whispers, "thank you," before walking away, feeling more and more self-conscious by the unit.

\* \* \*

><p>Rook feels like a complete jerk at the moment as he thinks of what he should do.<p>

He hasn't been acting like himself lately, especially after that Sangheili came into his life. She is far more affecting than Kunar, that much is sure. Her very presence throws him off his usual balanced self, she is excited, talkative and very energetic, it reminds him of himself when he was younger, but that life is far behind him now. She somehow causes him to second think his emotions towards her and has him looking out for her well-being despite her being his guard. At first he dismissed this as some sort of backlash from making that promise to her sister, but something tells him that's not the case. He doesn't know what it is that she does that affects him, but truth be told, it scared him that she had this effect on him.

He decided to try and remain neutral, avoid speaking whenever possible, basically be his old self. However, just doing that made him feel like a heel, and he always acted in this manner, why is it now that he is now cautious with his actions?

Then there is his family picture. He feels his hand automatically moving and checking to see if it's still there in his pants pocket. This one thing, his very last link to his long lost family, is probably the most precious possession he owns. It didn't only show his parents and his brother, but also it shows Clara. He feels his chest tighten, but he pushes the feeling away, he allowed a few tears



to fall every so often in the past, but he can't now, not with Rila here and watching.

He looks back at his new Sangheili companion who is sitting on one of the couches as she slowly inhales her meat with the use of mandibles in a strange and almost sickening way. He feels bad for how he is treating her this morning, what should he do, apologize?

Before he could decide on a course of action, he feels his pants leg vibrate and reaches into his pocket. He withdraws his earpiece, attach it to his ear and answers the call, "Yes?"

Rila looks up at the word, but Rook waves at his ear and he sees that she understands for she returns to eating.

"Hey Chief," it's Smyth, "Ambassador knows you don't have a car and asks me to come and pick you up, is that ok?"

Rook is about to decline when he remembers the incident yesterday when he and Rila walked back to his apartment the other night. The angry motorist, the cautious pedestrians and not to mention the little punk yesterday who showed there are a few people out there willing to spark violence. And that was just a short five block walk; the spaceport where they needed to be is on the other side of the city.

"Sure," Rookie said, "What kind of vehicle do you have?"

"A truck, generation-"

"Can Rila fit in the back?" The Sangheili in question looks up at the mention of her name but Rook doesn't give her a glance.

"Uh, I think so-"

"Alright, you can pick us up," Rook says as he begins to walk to his room, "how soon can you be here?"

"Well if I leave now before my shift starts, I can be there in a few minutes-"

"Ok, can you pick us up now then?"

"But I haven't eaten breakfast yet," Smyth starts to whine, but Rookie interrupted him again.

"I have six ounce steak here, you can have it," Rook says as he enters his room and takes out his duffle bag.

Smyth is silent so Rookie asks, "Smyth, you still there?"

Smyth is silent before responding, "Are you actually offering me food?" the astonishment in his voice is enough to cause Rookie to pause as he finishes, "Who are you and what have you done with Rookie?"

Rook thinks for a moment, have I really changed that much?

"Hey Rook," Smyth calls, "you alright?"

"I don't know," Rookie says quietly to Smyth before shaking his head and talks normally, "Come over and pick us up, we'll be ready by the time you drive up."

"Alright, and were you serious about steak?" Smyth asks.

"Come and get us," Rookie says impatiently before hanging up the line.

Now he places his bag on his bed and starts to rummage around in his dresser. He takes every one of his military cloths; the olive green T's with the Marine Core logo stamped on them, camouflage pants, PT clothes, and his dress uniform along with the small amount of medals he has accumulated over the years. He folds each and every one of them, including the socks, he is a Lieutenant now, a platoon leader, he needs to lead by example, though he doubts this small act is enough to turn the Marine into boy scouts, not that he wanted to anyway.

Rookie pauses as he thinks about what he has just thought of. He's going to be a leader of a small band of Marines; their very lives will be in his hands. Rook shivers at the idea, he was the leader of the security detail at the embassy, but this is different, here in the military the odds of death is much higher and the men and women he will be in charge of will be looking up to him for guidance and direction. It's time to see if he can be a leader that would make Buck proud.

Rook lastly takes out his family photo and places it within his bag. He stops momentarily to stare at them; his father Bonito, his mother Sophia, his brother Donny, and finally Clara. He runs a thumb over the polarized face as he remembers her, her glowing personality, her wise crack mouth, her strange but loving nature; it is enough to cause the man to smile. He is about to zip it up when he remembers Rila and that strange feeling of guilt when he ripped the photo out of her hand.

He sighs and is about to zip up the bag but stops. He looks up at the ceiling as he growls his frustration. \_What is wrong with me? This time hoping that someone would answer.

\* \* \*

><p>Rila puts the plate back on the counter as she sits back down on the couch, waiting for her human charge to come back out.<p>

She tries to wait patiently, but eventually she takes out her plasma rifle and starts to inspect it. While she does this, Rila allows her mind to travel back to the prospect of battle. She wonders what it will be like, to finally shoot her weapon, to wet her talons and to feel the glory of victory as she stands on the corpse of her enemies. It sounds almost like a ballad of the warriors of the old legends before the Sangheili joined the Covenant.

She stops at the almost disregarded memory. She has forgotten about that, she clips the rifle back onto her belt as she wonders about that small predicament. Humanity is still weary of the Sangheili, still full of hate and mistrust, that part is very much clear considering it was a youngling that attacked her the other day. Her thoughts returns to the conversation she had with her sister and the

warning about being cautious while being close to her human charge. She shivers at remembering how he barley talked to her when she woke up, has she done something wrong? Does he hate her? What has she done wrong?

She jumps when she hears the sound of the door opening and turns in time to see Rookie walking out with a long bag slung on his back. He has changed into a different set of clothing; he now wears a strange legging material that is colored in a variety of hues, green, brown and black. His upper garment now covers his whole arms, hugging it so tightly that she is able to see his muscles. He also wears a strange head piece that isn't a helmet, but made out of a garment that slightly hides his eyes from the world.

She instantly looks down, not wanting to provoke him, she feels her form shiver slightly at the thought that he may kill her.

Rookie stands still for a moment before she hears him walking towards her. She curls her hands slightly while trying to keep her breathing under control. The footsteps pause, right next to her. She wonders what he is going to do when he unexpectedly sits down next to her.

She swings her head around and peers at the human. He is indeed smaller than she is, yet he holds himself up almost with pride and obvious discipline.

He releases a small puff of air as he reaches into his pocket and withdraws the strange piece of paper with the image on it.

He holds it out to her and carefully, she leans forward to see it better. It hasn't changed, but now Rookie takes a deep breath as he speaks.

"This," he says with a heavy voice, "is my family."

She looks back at him and couldn't help but feel slightly thrilled that her assumption is correct. However that small sense of victory dies when she sees the pained look in Rookie's eyes as he gazes at the image, his eyes looking a bit like glass at the moment as the paper is reflected back in it.

He points with his finger at the older male and says, "That is my father, his name was Bonito," his finger than move to the other tall male, "that's me when I was younger," the digit travels further down and points at the older female, "that's my mother, Sophia." He then points at the youngling and says, "That's my younger brother Donatello, but everyone called him Donny," finally Rookie allows a smile to appear, "we all believed Donatello was a little too formal for a crazy kid like him."

Rila is confused, why did Rook find it amusing that his sibling was insane? She didn't question this; instead she wonders why Rookie hesitates as he stares at the final person in the image, the young female.

Rookie silence got onto Rila's nerves slightly so she points a talon at the female and asks, "and this? Is she your sister?"

She glances back at Rookie and is surprised when she sees his eyes

are hard, but despite this there is a fragile look about them, as if he is about to break down in tears.

He gulps before saying in a near whisper, "Thatâ€|that is my friend Clara Kitchensâ€|my good friend."

Hoping to lighten the mood slightly she asks, "do you think one day I can meet them? They look like good people and-"

"They're dead," Rila is surprised by both the answer and the way he said it; he spoke in a cold voice that sounds close to hatred. She silently curses her stupidity, she should have known, the war killed many people and there's only one reason why Rookie would seem emotional.

She looks back at the human who is sitting completely still like a warrior made of stone, his eyes now appears vacant as they stared at the image of his deceased family. Rila has rarely seen anyone cry, and most certainly not a human, but upon seeing him like thisâ€|it's almost too much to bear for some reason. Rookie has given her food and shelter and comfort when she was hit by the small projectile the other day. He may have done it as a good host and nothing more, but still he did it so caringly and warmly, causing Rila to feel responsible in returning the favor.

Not knowing how to comfort him in the human way, she decides to attempt it through Sangheilian means. Cautiously she lowers her head until it is about level with the human's and presses her head against Rookie's. His whole frame stiffens; he clutches the image with a death grip and his breathing just about stop. Rila pulls away, concern with what has just happen and wonders what she should say, what she should do.

Her human charge slowly looks up at her with unreadable eyes as he asks, "Whatâ€|are you doing?"

Rila becomes nervous, but she steels herself the best she could before replying, "I justâ€|I was trying to comfort you," here she looks down, now feeling horribly self-conscious.

But then she feels something grasping her hand and she looks up in surprise. Rookie has taken her hand into his and is now looking at her.

His eyes are still clear of emotions but he says in a solemn, yet astonished filled voice, "thank youâ€|"

Rila couldn't help but smile at the human as she leans forward and bumps her forehead against his again. He freezes like last time, but after a moment he relaxes just as Rila hoped he would. What she doesn't expect however is feeling one of his hands on her neck. Her eyes widen as her old fear surges through and she wonders if he is going to strangle her to death. Yet once again she is surprised, his hand doesn't enclose around her throat, instead, he begins to stroke it.

An indescribable feeling takes over Rila at the feel of his touch. So long has it been since a male has last graced her with his touch, almost no male finds her appealing anymore, not since she has stopped growing and is stuck in a minuscular body. She is also a bodyguard, a

soldier if any, charged with the protection of a human to whom the Arbiter owes a life debt. After meeting the human, Rila is surprised by how closed he is, how remote he appears, she never did once entertain the thought that he cared for her. Yet here he is, soothing her hide with the delicacy of a lover.

Rila closes her eyes as she enjoys the feeling, allowing the uncontrollable emotion to take over. Soon she tilts her head back slightly to give Rookie better access to her neck, feeling his somewhat soft hand brushing over her skin enjoyable. She has no idea what has happened or what is happening, but she hopes that he finds this as pleasurable as she does.

Without realizing it, she feels her throat starting to thrum like it does whenever she feels extremely happy. It's a natural reaction of her body, something that she couldn't control, which is why she feels embarrassed again when Rookie pauses in his caressing when he hears the odd sound.

She opens her eyes and leans back to look at the human. Amusement glitters in his eyes, but his face only holds confusion, he is probably feeling just as disordered as Rila is at the moment. Soon her confusion gives way to fear at what has just occurred. Would this have been seen as a courting? What would her family say about this, worse, what would the Sangheili council say if they saw this. No, more importantly, what will Rookie say, does he feel disgusted, affronted, or is it possible that he hates her now?

"I-I'm sorry," Rila finally says, "I shouldn't have done-it was inappropriate andâ€¦please," she soon begs, "please don't inform the council," she soon starts to squabble, "It was a mistake, it won't happen again, I swear." If the council hears of this her entire Keep may be dishonored, she will be dishonored, maybe even punished for her unexpected and irrational actions.

Her mind is still swimming when she feels the human hand touching hers. Eventually she becomes aware of it and looks up at Rookie who is giving her a serious look, but the delighted eyes remain the same despite his attempts at calming them.

"I should be the one apologizing," Rookie finally says, "I'm the one who started it."

She shivers at the memory, "Yes, but I took it further," she bows her head in shame, "I even took pleasure in what was happening andâ€¦" she sighs, "I'll understand it if you wish to have me replace."

She can already feel the disgrace mounting in status as she thinks of what has happened. She isn't really sure what it was that happen herself, only that she pushed her charge into doing something he probably didn't want, no, of course he didn't want to do it, she's another species and yet she felt as if they came close toâ€¦toâ€¦

Rookie squeezes her hand, gaining her attention, "Rila, it's alrightâ€¦Iâ€¦actuallyâ€¦likedâ€¦whatever it was that we were doing."

She looks up and sees he has a bashful like look on his face, but his voice rings with honesty as does his eyes. She felt joy surge through

her as she realizes he doesn't resent her, nor was he offended, far from it.

Her mandibles part in a Sangheili smile as she looks happily at the human, unable to believe the sudden relief she is feeling.

"Thank you," she finally says in earnest as she bows her head again, only this time out of gratitude.

She looks up in time to see Rookie smile back as he says, "you're welcome" and thank you for comforting me in the first place," he adds.

Rila smiles wider and before she realized it, her throat started to vibrate once more.

They stare at one another in complete and comforting silence until a device clipped to Rookie's ear beeps. He clicks a button, seems to be focusing for a bit before clicking the same command and says, "Our ride is here," with that he stands and shoulders his bag. He walks over to the food processing area and wraps a leftover steak in a strange fabric and carries it with him as he approaches the door.

Rila stands as well and makes sure everything is accounted for on her belt. She notices Rookie staring at her, she cocks her head a little in his direction and he asks, "Do you have a bag, or any belongings?"

Rila shakes her head, "As a guard, personal possessions may slow me down and provide unnecessary distractions so I have nothing."

Rookie gives her an odd look, appearing embarrassed as he asks, "What about" spare clothes?"

Rila feels herself become unbearably hot as they speak of her clothing, "I have no garments other than my armor, I am to be your life guard for years to come Rookie."

The human appears confused but before he could say anything else, they both hear a disturbance that originated outside, its the same sound the human vehicles often made when they are on the road.

Seeing her confused state, Rookie starts to walk to the door while saying, "That's my comrade Smyth from the embassy, he's going to drive us to the spaceport where we'll board our ship."

He opens the door and steps aside, looking at her in a unfamiliar manner. She then realizes that he wants her to go first. Reminding herself that she is to protect the human, she hurries forward, place a hand on her rifle and proceeds out the door.

The small walkway is deprived of danger; however she sees movement in the corner of her eye and turns. She spots the elderly female from the other night looking out her window before pulling fabric over the breech, hiding her from view. Rila is curious about her behavior, but has no time to think about that as Rookie steps out of the building and leads the way down the stairs, forcing Rila to trail behind.

Their footsteps mingle with one another as they descend, resounding with loud clanking as they continue downward. As they do so, Rila looks up and around at her surroundings, generally amazed by the human architecture. She almost bumps into Rookie when they come to a stop before the road.

Resting in front of them is one of humanity's odd looking vehicles. It seems longer than the others, but the compartment seems to stretch only a few feet from the front, leaving the rear of the machinery open to the elements.

Without a word, Rookie walks forward, lifts his bag and places it in the open end of the vehicle before walking to the compartment and a small hatch opens, revealing another human in the operator's position. They greet each other and Rookie hands the human the wrapped food, before they lean forward and begins to speak softly to one another, leavening Rila out of the conversation as they spoke softly to each other. She tries not to feel slightly hurt so she looks around at their surroundings, ensuring that there are no threats. Seeing that the place is secured; Rila than wanders forward and starts to look the vehicle over with an inquisitive gaze, musing over how it could possibly work. She is examining the strange light blinking in the rear of the vehicle when Rookie taps her on the shoulder, causing her to look back at him.

"I think we may have to sit in the back," he says and points at the open area with a finger, "There isn't enough room for us in the front."

She cocks her head to the side as she looks at the compartment and back at Rookie. She is sure there is room for Rookie to sit in the front, yet why is he choosing to ride in the back with her?

She feels her insides warm slightly, \_ is he starting to see me as a friend\_? She immediately ceases the thought, Rookie was right; she was here to perform a mission, not to make friends. But still she couldn't help but play with the thought; it would be nice to have someone to speak to and find comfort in every so often.

She brings her attention back to Rookie and bows her head, "Very well then Rookie"

\* \* \*

><p>Rook tries his best to remain casual, but he keeps shifting his position because of how close he is to Rila. She isn't doing anything, but for some reason the feeling of just being near her fills the air with inelegance. They are both laying side by side each other in the back of Smyth's truck, staying as low as possible so that Rila's appearance won't spark a panic. He could tell she is uncomfortable with the thought of people seeing her as a terrible thing, so he comforts her by lightly pressing his knee against hers and she responds by making the same peculiar noise that sounded like a cat purr to Rook's ears.<p>

The ODST Lieutenant really has no idea what is happening now. Every rule he makes whenever he deals with the Sangheili changes after each contact, like now, them being this close causes him to draw a blank.

He tries to focus on other things and attempts to count the seconds as they travel, but Rila's purring keeps distracting him until finally his eyes are pulled towards her direction and he unconsciously takes in her figure. She is small compared to other Sangheilis that's for sure; her height barely meets seven foot status. Her skin has a tint that makes it appear blue while her eyes remain dark, he wonders if they are black against black, or if she just had dark brown eyes like his. He is unable to feel it at the moment but he remembers the touch of her leather like skin against his just a few moments ago as they sat on his couch.

He shivers at the memory. Why did he do that? She was just comforting him by resting her snout against his face, but whatever posed him to massage her neck? He has to admit it felt nice, having another warm body against his, feeling her getting excited to the point where Rook felt the smile on his own face grow as she came closer. He hadn't felt like that since the time he and Clara snuck out and they started toâ€¦|

Rooks eyes widen in shock, horror, and slight revulsion. It can't be could it? They just met! Worse, she's his body guard, a Sangheili! He can't be falling for her, he can barely see her species as allies, how could he be seeing them as anything else? Anything more?

He feels like hyperventilating but instead he slowly let out control breaths. \_She's a woman\_, he tries to tell himself, \_it's your body acting this way not\_ you. Rooks reason slowly starts to take hold, but that assumption just won't go away, just won't leave him alone.

Since Clara died he has been resenting the Sangheilis as long as he could remember. Then there is his family, his papa, his mother, and hyperactive little Donny who wouldn't harm a fly, how could he, he was just a kid, a six year old kid who never harmed anyone.

Rook's blood starts to boil. He remembers Luke, Webo, and Madeline, his best friends in the Marine Core, did the Sangheilis care? Not when they burn his friends, not when they practically murdered them right in front of Rook's eyes.

He is now glaring at the sky, wondering why, why did his family died, why did his friends have to die? Those who didn't do anything wrong, as far as he knew, humanity didn't start the war, why did so many innocent people have to die just for someone's own selfish reasons?

"Rookie," Rila's voice brought him out of his blackness, "are you alright?"

He turns his gaze towards her and she flinches. He doesn't know why, but the sight of her looking afraid, more importantly, having fear in her eyes as she looks at him suddenly fills Rook with a feeling of pain and guilt.

Rookie softens his eyes before saying, "Yeahâ€¦|just thinking about what's going to happen soon."

He can see her confusion so he elaborates, "the upcoming battle."



She now grins at him, "It is exciting, is it not?"

Yes, Rookie does feel a degree of excitement, yet he still eyes Rila for she has spoken of war with an emotion in her voice that unease him; glee.

"Have you ever been in a fight Rila?" He asks her.

She looks away as if in self-conscious before replying with, "Not really, no."

Rookie stares at her for a while before sighing, "We're going to be fighting in a platoon, that will number to about forty eight Marines, drop shock troopers to be precise," Rila is now staring at him as he explains, "so the best way to ensure you'll stay alive is to befriend some of the troops, you watch their backs and they'll watch yours so in the end we can all go home safely."

Rila gives him a confused look, "You do not wish to die in combat?"

Now it's Rook to look at her strangely and slightly horrified before saying, "Of course not, don't you wish to survive; to live?"

Rila looks up at the sky before closing her eyes and mumbles, "I don't knowâ€¦I suppose I should survive," she says in a calm tone as if she is deciding what she should eat for her next meal, "I do have to protect you, but if I should die then I would win my Keep great honorâ€¦"

Rook gives her an unbelievable look, "You want to die?"

She turns back to face him, "If it comes down to saving you, my charge, then yes, I will sacrifice myself for you."

Rook is slightly taken aback by her commitment and the casualness in which she said it before saying, "Well until that time comes, I have to help keep you alive for your sister's sake, remember?"

Rila gives a small growl that alerts Rookie slightly as she says, "You don't have to worry about her, just tell her I fell in battle if it does come to that."

He shakes his head in defiance, "I can't do that Rila, I made your sister a promise."

This time she snarls, "She is just being an overprotective sibling."

Rookie chuckles at this, "Maybe its instinct."

She transfers her outrageous look to Rook and grumbles, "how would you know?"

Rook has no idea what sparked it, but her voiceâ€¦it sounded like that of a Sangheili male, a warrior. Then the reference to his family, his brotherâ€¦bright flames and the smell of burning flesh fills his vision as he remembers seeing his brother for the last time before he was taken from Rook's protective grasp by large clawed

hands.

Rook tightens his fists at the memory and looks up at Rila before saying coldly, "Because I use to be an older sibling as well."

Rila leans back, all traces of her anger is gone now, ensuring that she has heard the pain and the hatred in the human's tone.

"Rookie," she begins to say, but then the truck starts to slow before finally coming to a stop.

"We're here," he says and jumps out of the bed of the truck, suddenly finding her presence to be too much for him.

\* \* \*

><p>Rila fidgets slightly; her mind is still unable to understand what has happened in the past few units.<p>

When she awoke, the human was silent as if he was tempered by an unknown irritation. Then he became friendly and talked to her once more. Stranger still, she comforted him and he responded in a way that still makes her feel very warm inside. Now however that time has long since pass, and the human is once more silent in unmistakable anger.

They are onboard one of the strange human spacecraft, a green vehicle that she has seen humans ride into battle before. They are sitting in the rear of the tiny shuttle while the pilots are in the front, leading the ship to the much larger vessel that they are to ride in.

Every so often, Rila will look out of the corner of her eye and observes Rookie. He has his usual stoic look covering his face while his arms are folded. One of his feet starts to tap a furious rhythm as they wait to arrive at their destination.

Rila returns her gaze back down to her own feet as she ponders her situation. This isn't the first time that the human has become so defensive, but she has notice there is a form of pattern within his actions. He becomes reserve only whenever she speaks of one topic and that is when it concerns his family.

\_He must have really loved them to be feeling this way\_, she muses to herself. She can't really remember her own parents, or to be precise, her mother. The house mistress of the Keep died of a fatal disease when Rila was just a youngling, too young to even remember her face, a pain that hurts her for reasons she does not know. Her father lives, or so they say. In order to ensure no Sangheili young will ever swell with pride because of their parent's success, the bearer of the children of the Sa'u Keep is hidden from them. The only relative that Rila knows and loves is her sister, Fali. Rila tries to imagine what life would be like without her sister. In truth, without her caring sister, Rila would surely have gone mad from sorrow.

\_Can that even happen? If so, is that what happen to Rookie when he lost his kin\_?

She chances another look at the stone face human once more who looks like he is meditating with his eyes half closed.

She debates whether she should try until finally deciding her next plan of action, at least in this way he'll know of her stance.

"Rookie?" she asks in a small uncertain voice like she is a youngling once more.

The human blinks before giving Rila an empty glance with no emotion planted within them.

She shivers at the look, but she gathers herself and says, "I'm sorry for what I said earlier, I know my sister loves me and you no doubt must have loved your sibling, I just didn't think-

"Stop," Rila is surprised to hear the suffering in Rookie's voice. Now his eyes are fully closed, shut tight as if he is hiding from the world before saying, "It's alright, let'sâ€¦let's just stop talking about this alright?" it sounds as if he is begging, with his voice breaking at the end.

The sound of his distressed tone suddenly puts Rila on edge. She wanted to comfort him again, and in the back of her mind she knew she wouldn't mind having his fingers stroke her hair, but she forces that out of her head. He is still angry, just as likely to lash out as a battle drunk warrior would, yet the agony he is feelingâ€¦she couldn't stand it.

Saying a silent prayer or guidance, she moves her hand forward and takes his hand in hers. She feels his grip tighten to the point of her fingers being crushed, forcing her to release a small yelp at the unexpected force. After her small cry was released though, the pressure starts to decrease and Rookie begins to take in shallow breaths. Rila tries to ease her human charge but also at the same time remain on alert in case he starts to go on the attack. However the clenched hand softens until finally Rookie opens his eyes, gleaming brightly in the dimly lit compartment as he whispers, "sorry."

Rila bows her head and bumps it against him, her way of letting him know he is forgiven, a message that doesn't require words. She is starting to pull back when Rookie puts his other hand against her neck and starts to rub it like they did at the start of the day.

Not again, Rila thought to herself, but the bitterness leaks out at the feeling of his gentle hands running over her skin. She eventually releases a sigh and allows her throat to vibrate in pleasure.

However that brief moment of contentment is taken when a voice calls from the front of the ship, "Sir, we're about to enter the Shanghai."

Rookie breathes in deeply before pulling away from Rila, looking better but he still rubs his eyes with his fingers before calling back, "Good, thanks."

He then looks back at Rila, "and thank you Rila."

The Sangheili feels uncomfortable as she replies, "It was my pleasure

Rookie."

He chuckles lightly at this, but soon his stone cold look returns to his facial features. She wonders if he is still upset, but at that moment she grabs the sides of her seat as the whole craft begins to shake uncontrollably. Rila would have panic believing that the ship is malfunctioning, but then she sees Rookie's calm expression so she forces herself to relax as well.

Finally they came to a shuddering halt that nearly pushed Rila out of her seat.

"We're here sir," the same pilot calls back, "opening the hatch now."

Rookie doesn't say a thing as he slings on the headwear and stands, shouldering his bag as he does so. Rila rises as well, her head brushes the top of the ship, but at least she could fit within it. There is a hiss as pressure within in the small craft lessens and the huge back doors cracks open.

Rila blinks and releases a hiss as a blinding light steals her vision before it gradually returns. Her eyes widen at what she sees.

She has never seen the inside of a human Warcraft ship and here she is in the heart of one. The entire ship is made of the human's strangely grey tinted metal, covering the floor, walls, and ceilings. There is a huge passage way revealing the darken skies of the human planet upper atmosphere, barely making the outside world visible. The large space they are in is crowded with humans, some in brown coveralls while others wear green armor. They are rushing about as some of them move large crates, carry bags and she sees one of the human ground vehicles being driven along the length of the vessel. Here and there, small human air vehicles take flight, some are bulky like the ship they just rode in and others are small, looking as if only one being could fit within it. The air is heavy with a burning scent mixed with the smell of body odor and something that smells like spoiled meat; it isn't the best thing that Rila has smelled, but she can bare it. The scene is chaotic, but even that look very alien to Rila as she gazes at the humans, silently wondering if they ever do get any work done at all as they rush around like lunatics.

She hears an amused chuckle and turns to Rook who is watching her, but he quickly composes himself; as if he is trying to remain formal while in her presence.

\_By the Forerunners\_, Rila thinks savagely to herself, \_why must all humans be so odd\_?

As she wonders this, the door lowers itself and forms a ramp, it then that Rila takes notice of another human. Standing at the bottom of the newly form incline is a male wearing black armor, arms cross and appears just as serious as Rookie. His face is hard, a bit pale with spiked up black fur, then she notices he has a red blotching scar on the side of his face, with a shudder Rila realizes it's a plasma burn. The human catches sight of her then, his eyes widen for a moment before they lower into a glare and Rila couldn't help but feel slightly alarmed by the show of hostility.

Rookie starts to descend and Rila is quick to follow, feeling certain

that it might be best that Rookie takes the lead while they are in a strange place that only he is familiar with.

As they approach the back clad human, he stiffens like a board and raises his right hand to his head and simply says, "Lieutenant Sir."

Rookie pauses, appearing as confused as Rila feels before raising his own hand to mirror the man's action and says, "At ease, who are you trooper?"

The human crosses his arms behind his back and reply, "Alee West, I'm the Staff Sergeant for your platoon sir."

Rookie looks pleased as he steps forward and asks, "have you work with the men long Sergeant?"

The man known as Alee, shakes his head, "negative sir, it's a newly formed group consisting of old guys from the war and a bunch of new kids from boot."

Rookie groans and shakes his head slightly before asking, "Where are they?"

"Most likely in the canteen area, but do you wish to put your gear on?" Alee asks.

Rookie raises his bag, "This is all I got."

Alee appears puzzled as he bites his lip before saying, "We have some spare parts we can loan you sir, why don't you freshen up, get armored up and then you can meet your guys."

Rookie nods in agreement. It is then that Alee looks at Rila and asks, "What's this hinge head doing here?"

Rila isn't sure what a hinge head is, but she guesses from the fierce glare she is receiving it isn't a compliment.

"She," Rookie says in a surprisingly defensive voice, "is my personal bodyguard and will be treated with the same respect you would give any other soldier." "Sergeant," he finishes by stressing the man's rank.

A flash of anger appears in Alee's eyes, causing Rookie to stalk closer, revealing he is slightly taller than the man, "is that a problem West?"

They hold each other's gaze until Alee finally lowers his head and says lowly, "no sir," Rila could hear the respect in the human's voice and guess that Alee now sees Rookie as the leader.

Rookie nods at the man before saying, "Show me where I can furnish myself up Sergeant, please."

Alee appears shock when he hears the use of the formality at the end and appears suspicious before nodding. He turns on his heel and starts walking, leaving Rila and Rookie to follow.

As they walk, Rila couldn't help but feels a wonderful feeling rise

into her chest as she looks at Rookie. It is now obvious he is a veteran warrior, showing his strength, but he also shows respect to his followers while remaining astonishing faithful and defensive towards Rila. Is this what Rookie meant when he told her about watching each other's backs? She also remembers him saying that she needs to befriend some of the Marines in order to do this, but the chances of her doing that is slim as every so often they pass a human who would glare, hiss and occasionally spit in her direction. She gulps as she wonders if she can trust any of these humans while they are in battle.

Finally they reach a large door built into the wall that slides open as they approach. They enter a much brighter hallway, filled with lights and gleaming on the clean metallic surfaces. Rila sniffs the air and sighs, there is much better air quality in here, it still smells of a horrible aroma, but it isn't as bad as the room they left behind. As the three of them walk they pass by other humans with the same reaction, glares, curses, but this time there is no spitting, maybe they wish to keep this part of the vessel clean.

They rounded a corner and are about to pass a trio of Marines when the Sergeant suddenly says, "Stand to."

The soldiers stop and perform the strange action once more, standing straight while holding a hand to their heads. They appear different then the other humans and it isn't soon before Rila realizes why. They aren't wearing green battle armor, but black ones, appearing to be similar to the one the Sergeant is wearing.

"Lieutenant," Alee says, "these three are part of your platoon," he nods to each man as he indicates them, "Sergeant Mena Azim," he turns to the next, "Corporal Wolfgang Reiter," he gestures at the final soldier, "and Lance Corporal Matthew Williams."

Rila stares at the three, but particularly the one that has been called a Sergeant. She observes the soldier; there is something about him that seems a bit off. It is then that there is a small gust of air and she smelled it, the scent of a female. Her eyes widen slightly, she has seen human females who have long fur, yet this one has hers cut short in the likeness of a male's. Her face is strong with a deep set of hazel eyes that reveals an even stronger gleam in the light. Rila has heard legends of female heroes who were strong and mighty, but this is the first time she has ever seen a woman who fits the descriptions of the times of old.

The other is a male that much she knows from his appearance and scent. He has black fur that is cut short, outlining his slightly round head and revealing the skin on top. He is small, smaller than his fellow humans at the most, but he stands tall and appears ready to do as he is told, his azure eyes show enough commitment to prove that point. If Rila has to make an assumption, she would guess that this male is a youngling like her who just reached adulthood.

The final warrior is extremely different than that of the first two. The soldier, a male, is older than his comrades, he has a firm jaw and deep burrowed eyes that reveals a tired tint of green within them. He has no fur at all on his head and his face appears to be covered in creases, giving him the appearance of an elder. However his chest is broad as well as the rest of his midsection, this human is advance in years but he retains the frame of a warrior.

It is then that she realizes that the black armored Marines in turn has been studying her and, in excluding the old human, the other two hands were edging towards their belts.

Rookie must have notice as well for he moves forward and says, "She's with me, in fact, she will be joining us in the fighting, so under no circumstances are you to attack her, understood?"

The three Marines look to each other in partial confusion. Rookie suddenly stands straight and growls, "That's an order."

The young male, Wolfgang, and the female, Mena, looks down, but the older human, Matthew, she remembers, nods and it is then that she sees there is no hostility in his eyes.

Rookie nods in appreciation before saying, "We'll be heading off into war soon, so I suggest you get to know each other," he ends by looking back and forth between Rila and the group of Marines. Rila's eyes widen as she realizes what Rookie is implying.

She leans towards him and hisses, "What are you doing? I'm your guard; I should go with you wherever you go."

He gives a small sigh before looking back at her and says, "True, but Rila I need to shower and make myself presentable before meeting with the Admirals later in the day."

"But why can't I go with you to thisâ€¦shower," Rila asks, stumbling over the new word.

Rookie stiffens before looking at her with a strange look in his eyes.

"Rila," he says and she is sure she hears nervousness within his tone, "do you know what it means to shower?"

Rila ponders for a moment before shaking her head in defeat.

Rookie shifts around on his feet for a moment and rubs the back of his head, "Well Rilaâ€¦to shower means toâ€¦to clean myself."

Rila gives him an odd look before asking, "Well I can stand and watch you as you groom yourself."

Rookie's jaw drops and his eyes becomes large as he give Rila an unreadable look. She hears a muffled sound and turns to see Alee looking away, with a smile on his face. Mena gives her a cold stare and Wolfgang looks just as astonished as Rookie, leaving Matthew as the only one with a open smile on his face, his eyes twinkling with silent laughter.

Rila immediately feels embarrass, it is obvious she has said something rash and amusingly disturbing, she wonders what it is.

Rookie swallows, still looking stun before saying, "Rilaâ€¦when I...groom myself I cleanâ€¦my whole body."

Rila continues to watch him with a blank expression.

Rookie sighs before gesturing towards his lower body, "My \_whole\_ body."

Rila feels her breath get caught in her throat and she looks away from Rookie, feeling horribly exposed and mortified all at the same time. Finally Alee releases his light laughter, soon followed by a jolly like sound produced by Matthew while Wolfgang smiles silently, leaving Mena with the same hard expression.

Rookie finally regains his composure and motions for her to stand closer to him. She is weary of course, especially as entertained eyes follow her as she moves in closer to Rookie. He moves closer until his head almost brushes against hers.

"Remember what I told you about becoming close to your squad mates?" he asks.

Rila tries her best not to shiver as Rookie's warm breath tickles her skin, bringing faint memories of what has occurred at his home and on the ride to the ship. Eventually though she is able to force her head to move up and down in response to Rookie's question.

"While I'm gone, I need you to try and get along with the platoon, these are the men and women who you are going to be working with and entrusting your life to, understand."

Rila nods, but again she wonders about Rookie. Why does he not wish her to die a glorious death or for him to pass in a similar fashion as well? Perhaps it's just another human trait that she may never understand.

Rookie steps back, nods to her and says, "I'll find you later," he turns to go but Rila steps up next to him again and hisses into his ear, "but the Arbiter instructed me to look after you and not to-"

"Rila," Rookie interrupts before turning around to face her, "look around," he gestures with his hand at the hallway, "there is no one on this ship who wishes to harm me, I'll be fine."

Rila swallows, truth she is following orders when she asked the question, but she knew deep inside her she was hoping that he will allow her to come with him. He has comforted and made her feel special despite that everyone within his race disliked her, including the three Marines who are present. There is also the fact that she is still puzzled by the human's culture, she does not wish to cause trouble or humiliate somebody by accident again. Oddly enough, it is apparent that Rookie is the one taking care of her when it should be the other way around.

She gives a shivering breath and nods while lowering her face to the ground, feeling like she is about to attend her own execution. She suddenly freezes when she feels something warm on her skin and looks up.

Rookie has placed his hand over her right cheek; it warms her face while they apply a small amount of pressure onto her mandibles, preventing them from quivering as she feels they would. Instead her whole body shakes at the contact, one that she wishes would never



leave. She moves her head closer to Rookie's who smiled at her and says, "It'll be ok Rila."

Somehow, for some reason, Rila believes the human.

They suddenly hear someone release a disgusted sound that jolted them from their stance. Rookie steps away from Rila, taking the warmth with him. He offers her a smile before turning and walks down the hall. He approaches a portal that slides open, allowing him to enter before closing again.

Rila gulps before turning and faces the Marines before her. Alee is wearing a smug smile, Mena looks menacing, Wolfgang appears confused and Matthew still has the bright twinkle in his eye that she had noticed earlier.

Rila gives them a self-conscious smile, wondering what they will say. All the males gives her their own smile in return, but not the female. Instead she releases the same grunt of revulsion that Rila has heard earlier before turning on her heels and marches away. The males follows Rila's gaze as they watch Mena walk away until she passes through the doorway on the other side of the hall and disappears from view.

An awkward silence now fills the space between Rila and the remaining Marines as they continue to stare at each other uncertainly, wondering who is going to speak next.

Finally Matthew clears his throat before stepping forward and asks, "Do you want to get something to eat?"

\*\*Sorry it took me a while to update, my life just got busy, hope you can understand.\*\*

\*\*Also, if the romance is moving too fast for your taste, check out my other story, "Halo: An Unexpected Alliance," I'm not sure if it's at a steady pace, but it's a lot slower, you can read it if you want.\*\*

\*\*Thanks for reading and I hope you enjoyed.\*\*

#### 4. The Drop

\*\*The Drop\*\*

Rookie breathes deeply and evenly as hot droplets land on his body. He closes his eyes as he tries to savor this sensation. Being clean is a luxury compared to where he is going.

He gives a quaky sigh as he stops the shower, halting the artificial rain. Yet he stands in the small stall for a few more minutes, allowing the steam to warm his insides. He always gets cold chills whenever they ready to deploy, but this time it's different. This time he will be the one leading the way and the one who his troopers will be relying on. He is no longer part of the squad, he is now the commander the squad.

He thought of all the leaders he served under; Lieutenant Knell, First Sergeant Hall, Master Sergeant Shadwell, and Gunnery Sergeant

Buck. They were all good men and women; could he lead like them?

He shakes off the small droplets off his body as if they were the source of his doubts. He steps out of the stall without even checking if the room is clear.

The shower room is bare except for two parallel rows of lockers running alongside the wall, the benches in the middle and the dozen shower stalls fixed within the wall. Rookie does a quick sweep and sees he is the only one occupying the space. Even if there was someone in there with him it wouldn't have bothered him, he, like everyone else in the Corps and Navy, were trained not to get "sentimental" around unclothed people.

With that, he goes over to the locker that is housing his bag and towel but pauses when he reaches it. Leaning against the iron cage is a small black duffle bag; the fabric is being pushed outward which suggests that there is something rather large lying within.

Curiosity gets the better of Rook as he leans down and unzips it. Within is the black armor and helmet of an ODST Marine. Its dark color is pierced by the grey pattern of the BDU which gives it a light camouflage feature that does its job quite poorly unless it's within an urban center. The helmet is polarized by a light blue color and has a COMM device attached to its side.

Rook stares at the battle set as if they're jewels, and in a way it is for the young officer. Black suit and ties weren't meant for him, he was meant to bear this symbol of the Corps, to be on the frontlines as a Marine.

He opens his locker and removes his towel and clothes. He quickly wipes down his body and places on his garments, a green t-shirt with the UNSC logo on it and black pants. That is when he places his focus on the ODST gear and starts placing it on.

Though it has been a long time, years of practice has him putting on his armor as if it was all instinct. He places on the leg guard, the pads, the gauntlets, gloves and finally the helmet. He walks in front of the nearby mirror and inspects himself.

He is a six foot tall, one hundred percent, patriotic Marine. The ODST that stares back at Rookie looks like the professionals often seen on the posters; a silent killer and expert on fighting. His attire is all black armor save for the blue faceplate andâ€¦something else.

That is when he notices that there is some sort of symbol that has been painted on his arm and turns to inspect it. It is a symbol that is painted in the shape of a bright red shield with a black skull with long fangs staring back. Behind the skull are two double bladed war axes that are crossed behind the skull, making it into an eerie emblem. Decorated around the skull is an array of dark stars, six spread out in the cardinal directions and in between them; giving it an almost sinister appearance. Rook recognizes the image instantly; it is the insignia of one of the ODST Raiders Battalions.

Now Rookie isn't sure whether to be reassured or worried. The Raiders trademark is infiltrating deep into hostile zones. They are made

legendary because they show true grit, stubbornness and incredible courage because once they are in they are often cut off from the rest of the military force, which means no support at all.

Rookie is sure after the mission in New Mombasa, he and everyone in Buck's team probably would have been considered Raiders. He knew that they can take on anything, they surely would have made the cut in being Raiders; they were young, patriotic and strong.

But his platoonâ€|he hasn't even met them yet.

The young Marine pups may possibly have energy and stamina, but do they possess the courage and commitment? The older guns, the veterans of the war, they must have potential in order for them to have made it this long, but could their age hinder their ability to fight?

Rookie shakes his head as he stuffs the duffle bag into the locker. Too many questions and not enough answers, he needs to review his platoon and see how well organize they are.

But first he needs to report to the Admiral and see what the Corps has in store for him.

\* \* \*

><p>Rila looks over the "Canteen" area once more, but she is still amazed by what she sees.<p>

She is surrounded by hundreds if not thousands of human Marines. They are all of the same specie yet they look so different. They have a variety of fur color, heights, and bodies and, unlike Sangehilos; they are eating side by side each other regardless of their genders. She sees that they are also dressed differently, they are wearing either the same clothing as Rookie, different garments designed for the upper and lower body region, or they are wearing battle armor. There are even some people who doesn't appear to be a part of these Marines, they are wearing a kind of grey coveralls that clings onto their bodies and they aren't wearing any body armor or weapons; she conclude that these humans are a part of the ship's crew.

After sweeping the large hall once more it is then that she realizes that as she studied them, the humans in turn are studying her. They turn away from their foods and slide around their seats until they have a full view of her. Some have expressions of shock, disbelief, confusion, but in most cases, they appear to be filled with hatred.

She gulps nervously and is starting to reconsider her choice when Matthew and Wolfgang joins her. They are both carrying trays of what looks like food, save for Matthew who is holding two trays and hoists one up to her with a small smile on his face.

She nods gratefully and takes the tray, barley even noticing what it is that she has for she is still focused on the hard eyes of the humans. Sensing her discomfort, Matthew gently nudges her and says, "Mind joining us?"

She gulps, but nods again in response. He and Wolfgang share a look before they started walking towards the back of the room, forcing

Rila to follow after them. As they move more and more heads turn and a hush seems to fill the room. She grew alarm when she sees a few hands reaching for weapons that are clipped to the human's belts, but aside from hostile looks, none makes a move.

Matthew and Wolfgang finally sit down at a table close to the wall and even closer to an exit. She has only met these Troopers, but she appreciates their quick thinking or Matthew's thinking since he appears to be making all the decisions.

She settles herself opposite of the two males who watches her with interest. She does her best not to appear insulted by this action, she suppose she is the first Sangheili they have ever seen up close, but all the gazing is starting to get to her nerves.

She then examines the meal before her. She has eaten only a few units ago, but she thought it would be rude to decline the Trooper's attempt at making friends. The food is of strange assortment of substances; there appears to be a brown square topped by a white blob that is covered in a greyish substance. A smaller plate holds long green strands and a cup in the corner of the tray houses a black liquid. The sight is enough to make Rila's stomach turn.

Suddenly something sits down next to her and says a strange word, "Privyetiki!"

Rila turns and inspect the person sitting next to her. She sniffs the air and determines that the person next to her is a female. The female seems to be the same height as Rookie, but she has a younger face, bright eyes and long fur that seem to fall down her shoulder. She smiles at Rila before looking at the males across from them and nods in their direction.

Rila wonders if the female spoke in gibberish, but before she could ask, Wolfgang leans forward eagerly and says in turn, "Privyetiki Anya."

The female, Anya, smiles again and starts to converse with Wolfgang who responds in kind in the strange tongue.

Matthew rolls his eyes as he sticks a utensil into his food and mutters, "Russians."

Suddenly Wolfgang turns on Matthew and states aggressively, "My grandparents were Russians, I'm from Mars."

Matthew shakes his head, "I know; that's probably the thousandth time you told me that."

Anya chuckles at them before turning to Rila as she puts an elbow on the table and rests her head on her hand. "So," she says in a strange voice with her wide grin, "I heard you wanted to check our new LT out, is that true?"

Rila tilts her head slightly, unsure what this strange female meant.

Wolfgang coughs and she notices he appears embarrassed as he says, "She, uhâ€|she's asking if you are interested in our new Lieutenant."

Rila is curious by this, but she nods, "Yes I am," she says, "he's a peculiar human worth studying."

Anya suddenly burst out laughing and lowers face into her arms as she tries to regain control of herself while Matthew chuckle with her, leaving Wolfgang as the only with a shock expression on his face.

Finally Anya looks back up and bumps her shoulder against Rila's, "You're alright," she says rather cheerfully, "from the way Azim was talking about you I thought you were a stalker or something."

Rila has no idea what this female is talking about, but she recognize one word so she asks, "Sergeant Azim was talking about me?"

"Sure," Anya says as she bobs her head, "She's sitting over there."

Rila follows the direction of the bobbing head and sure enough at the directed table sits the female Sergeant. Rila shivers when she sees that Azim is looking back with a cold glare while everyone else at her table regards her curiously. The only other face she identifies is Alee West, who nods at her before looking back down and starts eating his food again.

Rila looks returns to her table and sees that Anya and Wolfgang are talking again in their weird language while Matthew returns to eating his food.

Rila looks down at her own meal; she shudders before picking at a small piece of the substance with the odd oval shaped utensil with a handle. She lifts the food up, sniffs and does her best not to gag. Slowly she opens her mandibles and gently eases the gooey substance into her mouth. Her jaws then grab hold of the food and push it down her throat.

Rila doubles over and does her best to swallow; the foul food is definitely not meat. Everyone at the table gives a small laugh as they watch her as they easily dig into their own meals with ease.

Rila is sure they didn't mean to sound cruel, but she couldn't help but lower her head, feeling more and more separate from the group.

She is distracted from her thoughts when someone else joins them.

"Finally," the person said in the rough voice of a male, "someone who agrees with me when I say our chow is crap."

Once again the Sangheili turns to see who has joined their small group.

As she already determine it is a male and she couldn't help but marvel at him. He is surely taller than she is, has no fur on his head, a dark complexion and a scowl on his face which, for once, isn't directed at her.

He regards her carefully before asking, "You don't like this stuff either do you?" referring to the food on her plate.

Rila feels herself become weary before slowly nodding in reply. He nods in agreement as he says, "Same here, awful stuff this is, I much prefer MRE rather this crap."

Wolfgang pauses in his eating as he looks up and says, "At least this 'crap' is warm, MREs are stone cold."

The male grunt before looking at Rila and nods again, "I'm Scott, Scott Wiley."

She nods in return, "Rila Sa'u."

"Mind me asking what it is you're doing here?" Scott asks as he pulls a rectangular object from his pocket, which he unfolds, revealing a rectangular brown bar which he slowly begins to eat.

Before Rila could respond, Matthew speaks for her, "She's our new Lieutenant's bodyguard."

This causes Scott to look up, "What? Our LT needs a bodyguard?"

Rila thinks for a moment before speaking, "Well, he's an experienced warrior, but he saved the Arbiter," she explains carefully, "In return for his actions, the Arbiter has ordered me to be his bodyguard, for life."

The table is silent before Anya bumps into Rila's shoulder again, "Well that must be great for you, especially if you're sneaking peeks at his body."

Rila feels herself grow warm as everyone laugh at this. She doesn't know what it is, but this laughter sounds different then the one before, they weren't laughing at her, more like they were laughing with her at her own honest mistake so she allows a smile to break out on her expression.

"So what about you," Matthew suddenly asks, "Have you seen much combat?"

Rila suddenly becomes shy again as she shakes her head in negative responds.

"Well that's a surprise," Anya says as she nudges the Sangheili again as if it's some sort of nervous twitch she suddenly developed, "from the way I hear it, Sangheilis are naturally born fighters."

Rila thinks for a moment before saying, "Indeed, but since we became allies with your race and the Covenant hasn't appeared on Sangehilos, hardly anyone is tested by conflict."

"Are you scared," Wolfgang suddenly asks in a dead serious voice as he eyes Rila strangely.

She regards the human before answering, "I'm nervous, but no, I'm not scared, I'm eager to embrace battle."

The humans all stare at her as if she has done something rash and she

starts to wonder whether she said something wrong.

"So you never been in combat?" a new voice asks from behind.

Rila looks around and sees it is Sergeant Azim who is still glaring at her. She wonders what it is she has done wrong to cause this human to dislike her so much, but she is sure they are the same reasons as those the other scowling humans are carrying.

Rila nods her head in confirmation, "Yes," she says gently, "I've never been in battle before."

"Then you don't belong here," Azim says fiercely as she steps forward with complete malice in her voice, "We don't need you, a suicidal split lip throwing us all off our game," her eyes narrow as she continues, "I've seen your kind, you're willing to put your whole squad in jeopardy just so that you can win yourself one ounce of glory that won't mean crap to anyone."

Rila is stunned by this accusation, she would have argued, but she stares transfixed by this female. She is surprised, not because the human is saying this, but because she is saying it with complete and absolute conviction.

Azim leans forward as she continues, "This is Raider squad Epsilon, we are supposed to be the best of the best and that is what we are, we don't need the likes of you joining us, not some half-wit who has never experienced battle or what it means to kill," her eyes bore into Rila as she finishes, "This is a platoon for real warriors, something that you're not and clearly will never be."

With the initial shock over, Rila now feels the rage starting to take over, but before she could unleash it, somebody steps in between the two females.

"Enough," Alee says as he looks between the Sergeant and Rila, "You're talking about warriors when you're acting like little kids."

Azim glowers at him, "But West--"

"That's Staff Sergeant West to you Sergeant," Alee suddenly said as he turns to her, "and may I remind you that you haven't experienced combat either, so who are you to start throwing around accusations?"

Azim is fuming, but she does not say a word.

Alee then looks around and that's when Rila realizes that everyone on the Canteen has stopped talking and are now all watching her.

"That goes for the rest of you," Alee commands, "In the Raiders Battalion we judge ourselves by skill, not by how many engagements we have been in" he scans the tables before saying, "We're all in the same boat together, I don't want any mindless morons causing leaks in it simply because they can't keep their personal drama out of it, is that clear?"

Marines and Navy bobs their head, but their hard stares never waver. One by one, people turn their backs and returns back to their

trays.

Alee then looks at Azim and demands, "Anything else you wish to say Sergeant?"

Azim seethes but mutters, "Noâ€|sir."

"Then fall out," he commands in a hard voice.

Azim holds her ground for a few more moments before turning and marches back to her table and sits down, casting a grimace at anyone who looks her way.

Alee shakes his head before turning away as well and walks after her, but this time he sits on the far corner of the table.

Rila looks down at the floor as Azim's words float through her mind. Is she worthy? Why is it that she would not be considered a real warrior? Has she made a mistake in coming here?

She stares at her clawed hands and for the first time in her life, she regrets being a Sangheili. She just wants to belong, she wants to get along with these people, but that seems impossible for they all hate her just for being. How can she befriend these people?

She feels her shoulder being poked and looks up to see Anya giving her a kind smile as she says, "You know, I've never been in battle before, yet here I am," she then gestures at a strange emblem that is patched to her shoulder on her shirt.

"Same here," Wolfgang voices in, "this will be my first combat drop."

Rila then turns to Scott, they lock eyes and he shrugs his broad shoulders, "I've only gotten into one scrape once, it was so short I'm sure it wouldn't be considered a fight."

Finally she looks to Matthew, who old weary eyes answers her silent question before he spoke, "I've seen one too many engagements, but I'm ready for the next bout."

Anya than places her hand on Rila's shoulder, "Don't worry about it Rila," she says softly, "by the end of the week, we're all be warriors."

"Yeah," Scott says, "and in thanks we're receive more crappy food than we can ever imagine-"

"Oh would you give it a rest with the food already," Wolfgang suddenly blurts out.

Rila chuckles at this, but she suddenly feels better. She looks at each person at the table, they might not have fully accepted her, but it's a start.

Then she flinches when she hears a loud piercing whistle sound throughout the ship. It strikes her hearing hard and causing her senses to ring; she feels like clamping her hands on the side of her head when the sound ceases as a loud voice suddenly barks, "All Troopers report to designated launching area; all Troopers report to



designated launch area." There is a click and all is silent.

The room is completely still for a moment before all the Marines jump to their feet and races for the exit. Everyone at Rila's table remains seated however.

"Launch area?" Wolfgang finally asks nervously, "We can't be there already can we?"

Matthew checks his watch, "We might be going to a different battlefield or there's been a change of plans," he then stands and stretches, his old limbs releasing loud cracks in protest, "either way, we're going."

Rila looks at them one more time before asking rather timidly, "Where should I go?" No one has ever talks to her about a "designated" launch area.

Scott shrugs as he stands up, "Well you're second platoon's LT's bodyguard, so I guess you'll come with us."

Anya slaps the armor on Rila's back as she happily declares, "Welcome to the Orbital Drop Shock Raiders," as she displays the symbol on her arm again.

The sight of a black skull against a crimson red setting suddenly makes Rila feel sickly.

\* \* \*

><p>Rookie walks around on the podium as he reviews his speech.<p>

He isn't happy about the arrangements, but when the Corps makes the decision he has to follow them, even if he is an officer now.

He looks up at the small circular terminal before him and runs a quick diagnostic. The preloaded holographic map is there at the ready, he just needs to press the button and it'll appear.

He inhales deeply in nervousness, barley acknowledging the smell of grease and oil. The launching room he is in is huge, as it's meant to be. There's enough space for the troopers to walk around, a miniature armory in the side of the wall and the SOEIV pods on the opposite wall.

Rookie looks up briefly and gives them all a rundown. The drop pods are all line up in a neat room, exactly forty eight miniature insertion vehicles for forty eight Marines. He then notices that at the front is a modified pod, built larger than the others. He guesses that one is for Rila, the Ambassador must have called ahead and inform the ship of their Sangheili guest.

The hatch is open on all of them, offering a view of the single seat within, the handlebars on the side and the small computer for communications. They are tinted pitch black except for the ODSF logo which displays a skull with angel wings before the outline of a miniature pod behind it. Rook notices that somebody has quickly etched on the Raider's coat of arms directly above the ODSF logo.

He stares at the skull and hopes that everyone will make it. The SOEIV's are what makes the shock Troopers so well known; it's their signature mark to crash onto a planet within a burning metal box, ready to fight. However what most people don't know is that the pods offer disadvantages as well. A Trooper could get stuck inside, they could drown if the pod lands in a body of water, they could break every bone in their body upon crashing or, in most cases, they get cooked while they enter a planet's atmosphere. The SOEIVs are ODS's life and joy, but it is also their casket as well.

Rookie knows the greatest way to show his commitment to Earth is by stepping into a SOEIV. Only the strong, the brave, or the crazy, would be willing to step into a pod. This just goes to show how tough a Trooper is, by standing on the line before death itself.

The sound of a door being slid open brings him out of his thinking and he turns to look at the Platoon; his platoon.

The men and women that stroll in practically display all the cultures of Earth. Some are wearing civilian clothes, while others are wearing their black armor set. He notices that they are all a mix, there are the jokers, the serious faces, the mild, the tough and the people who have good poker faces. Their ages mingle with one another, but the one thing he notices is that most of them are young; leaving only a few older generation soldiers out. If he has to guess, the youngest appears to be eighteen, maybe even seventeen while the oldest seems to be approaching fifty. They all file in and mill around like lost sheep before a small number of people sorts them out, when he spots West among the group, Rook guess that these people are his NCOs (Non-Commission Officers).

He then sees Rila who is position in the back of the group. Despite her miniature size, she actually stands well above average human height. Save for one guy who is almost the same length as her, the very same one who is holding her attention. That is when he notices that she is enfolded within a small group of Troopers, he identifies Wolfgang and Matthew, but there is now another woman and the tall guy as well. He hopes that they aren't bothering her, but he assumes from her smiling face that she is doing alright.

He waits a couple more of minutes before the Troopers are spread out and they now have their focus on him.

Rook gulps, but other than that he doesn't move an inch. He can't show his platoon that he is nervous. As their CO he is to be their pillar of strength, their voice of reason in a sea of chaos. He has to earn their respect while also being able to draw the line, be protective of them yet accepting should their time come. The responsibility of being a leader is a hard and treacherous life, he has to keep the men's best interest first whenever possible, but in the end it all boils down to serving the UNSC. He needs to lead them, to serve them as a leader, only then will they truly follow, not because they have to, but because they want to.

He gives the group one last sweep, meeting some of their eyes before moving on. However his eye gets caught when they land on Rila. Her slit eyes came out as a shock from the ocean of round pupils, they hold their brief connection for a few moments, in which time she smile at him. He couldn't return the show of affection without starting rumors of favoritism, but something goads him forward and he

nods in her direction before putting his focus back on the group before him.

He breathes before speaking in a loud voice, "Morning Raiders."

The group stands up straight and bellows back, "Morning sir."

Rook waits for a few moments before stating, "I'm your new and first Lieutenant, you may address me by rank or by the name Rookie or Rook."

He sees the Marines looking at each other in confusion, but he pays them no mind as he continues, "We are a newly formed platoon, but we are part of the Raiders, which means we are seen as some of the best that the UNSC has to offer." The Troopers nod in agreement and the younger Marines looks ecstatic at the praise, "keep that in mind," he continues, "you are the best train Marines in the whole galaxy, it's time we show the world that."

He steps to the side of the platform and clicks on the holographic projector. The light beams are activated and points to the center of the holo-tank. The Emblem of the United Nation Space Command appears first in bright blue light, an Eagle with spread wings with the acronyms UNSC displayed and their meaning beneath them. The symbol flashes away and a sphere takes it place, within seconds lines, dots and blobs digitally appears, slowing constructing an image of a miniature Earth.

"I'm sure you are all aware of what is happening in the northern hemisphere, but here are the cold stone facts." The image zooms in until it shows the upper portion of Earth where eighteen Covenant ships are floating. "The Covenant lacks the power and energy to glass Earth," Rookie explains, "however, they have more than enough troops to destroy it though," here the holographic ships release smaller vessels which descends and divert in different directions as they land on the planet. "As far as we know, the cities of Juno, Moscow, and Nuuk has been completely destroyed." Here great flames are shown, so great that they appear from space as the mega wide metropolises burn. Rook sees more than one angered face, this may be cruel, but now the troopers are getting motivated.

Rook clicks a few more buttons and the image retreats further south, as it does so, Rook continues speaking.

"Our original plan was to get dropped into the city of New York, but that changed."

Finally the holographic image pauses over an urban center that covers miles upon miles of land.

"We are, instead, going to be deployed to Grand Rapids, North America."

Here some Marines begin to whisper among themselves, and not for the first time does Rookie wonder if any of them are from the area or have relatives living in the city.

Rook waits for a moment before continuing, "Grand Rapids officially became a part of Chicago during the grand expansion period, but this portion has always remained so named because it is built alongside

the Grand River." As if to agree with him, the hologram highlights the blue wavy line that snakes through the center of the city.

"Here's what's happening people," Rook says, "The Covenant is engaged with the Navy in the upper atmosphere, but this doesn't stop them from sending down enemy combatants." The image changes to one full of smoke and fire while antiaircraft weapons fire sparks and plasma into the air.

"This is the fifth day since the Covenant entered this portion of Chicago, we have them detain, but unless we do something real quick they're going to break through our defenses, storm through the rest of the metropolis and farther down into the South, ending many more lives."

The Lieutenant lets his words hang suspended in the air for a moment before saying what they are waiting for him to say, "This is what we're going to do."

The hologram closes in on one area close to the river, with skyscrapers placed on either side of it.

"The UNSC infantry was able to halt the siege and form a defensive line, with Covies on one side of the river," the land on the right turns red, "and our forces hold the other side," the said section is lighted in a blue hue.

"Command wants us Raiders to become security guards more or less" Rook gestures at one of the skyscrapers that is in the middle of the screen, "and this will be our outpost, Outpost Phoenix."

The building is a large structure whose windows have been tinted black, it still stands tall and seems to have obtained little damage, except for the huge gaping hole in between the fifteenth and seventy second floor, other than that, the one hundred fifty floor skyscraper is unscratched. Another thing that is standing is a massive sign on the front with the faded letters, "Amway Grand Plaza Hotel" hanging from the second floor.

"We're going to occupy, fortify and eventually repel any Covenant forces," here the scene shifts further down until it is at the river. Blue dots light one side where miniature figures and Scorpion tanks are shown while the other shows a mass red signal.

"The 67th Infantry and the 501st Armor Division have been fighting the Covenant since the first day," Rook explains, "Command wants us to reinforce them, both in number and power. This is going to be prolonged deployment," he looks up at the crowd, "which means we may be here for a while, so make sure you have plenty of ammo and MREs, it wouldn't hurt to take an extra weapon as well." He pauses before asking "any questions?"

There is a second of silence before a voice from somewhere within the Platoon asks, "Sir, what are we waiting for? I mean what are we holding the line for?"

"We are waiting for the Sangheili fleet to join us," Rook answers, "with our combined fire power we'll have more than enough force to wipe out the Covies, both in the air and on the ground."

When the Lieutenant becomes silent, another one asks, "When will the Sangheili get here sir?"

Rook shrugs, "Unknown, hopefully by the end of the week."

Another question immediately follows next, "Sir, we're Raiders," among the Troopers people nod in agreement and swell with pride, "so why don't we attack the enemy directly?"

Because you're green, Rook wanted to admit, but instead he says, "We don't have the means to go on the offense, we barely have enough weapons and ammunition to put up a defense as it is, so if you want to lead a charge you have to do it with your bare hands."

Again quiet before a familiar voice asks, "Do we have to deploy with the Sangheili sir?" This question caught the most interest and almost out of reflex, everyone turns their heads to peer at Rila, who answers this by keeping her eyes on Rook and trying her best to ignore them.

Rookie releases a small sigh, "Rila Sa'u is a fellow warrior and an ally Sergeant Azim," he says patiently, "she'll be dropping with us and she will fight alongside us."

"But sir--"

"Is this going to be a problem Sergeant?" Rook suddenly demands and begins scanning the room looking for the Sergeant in question. When he found her she has her eyes lowered and not meeting his gaze.

"Is it Sergeant?" he asks again.

A heartbeat later she mutters loud enough for all of them to hear, "No sir."

Rook nods before looking up, "If any of you have a problem, then speak up now and I'll have you transfer to another unit." The Marines look among themselves, their eyes silently asking one another the same question until a few seconds of silence has finally past.

"No problems?" Rook asks. A few Troopers nod their heads while a few mutter confirmation.

"If there is any, then suck it up," Rook orders, "You're Marines, so don't come crying to me if life is too unfair for you."

The Trooper says nothing, as if they really didn't know what to say.

Rook checks his watch before informing them, "I know it's rushed, but we're dropping in fifteen minutes," he sees some of the younger faces looking worried so he says, "you know the drill, no personal belongings, bring warm BCUs for the wet climate and gear up."

The Platoon stands there for another a moment before Rookie says, "now."

That did it. The NCOs turn on their heels and starts barking, "Alright, everybody, fall out, you heard the L.T! Let's get

moving!"

\* \* \*

><p>Rila stands in the back as she watches her comrades get ready for battle.<p>

There are metal containers on the wall, it is from there that most of the humans pull out their armor and weapons. She watches in fascination as Anya puts on her black metal attire. She observes Wolfgang as he takes his weapon apart, cleans it and starts reassembling it. She gazes at Matthew as he opens a box on his hip and places in vials, long sheets of white clothing and a bottle with a nuzzle within. Scott meanwhile is packing a bag full of clothing material; some were lace with a fur while the others are colored in a grey and black pattern. She is aware she is the only one not performing any duties so she sits on a nearby long chair, a bench she reminds herself, while her...friends she suppose, finish preparing themselves.

Finally, Scott says, "So that's our new Lieutenant huh." He says this more as a statement rather than a question.

Wolfgang pauses in his work to say, "I like him, he looks like he knows what he's doing."

"Got that right," Matthew injects, "Especially with the way he handled Azim, he drew the line and earned at least some respect from the men."

Rila thinks about that statement before asking hesitantly, "Does that bother you?" The humans' pauses with what they are doing as they look at Rila questionably. She swallows before asking, "does it bother youâ€|working with me?"

The four humans look among themselves before Anya says, "Konechno, net, it'll be different, but I'm for one am not bothered."

Wolfgang and Scott shake their heads while Matthew just gives Rila a friendly smile.

This small acceptance however doesn't make Rila feel better. She cranes her head over her shoulder, and sure enough, at least three Troopers were staring at her before they quickly look away. She knows these humans are now her comrades, but what about the rest of thisâ€|platoon?

Scott drops the bag he packed on the floor before picking up another one and starts packing things into it as well while saying, "I don't know."

Rila looks at him and wonders if they are still talking about her.

Scott notices her questionable look and says, "Not you Rila, I mean I don't know what to think about the Lieutenant."

Rila wonders for a moment before saying, "Well he's been in combat before so I suppose he has experience."

Anya shrugs, "I guess we'll all find out when we're all on the ground together."

"No," Scott says, "What I'm trying to get at is how do we know he isn't a glory hound or something. How do we know we can trust him?"

Rila gives him a worried glance before asking in a small voice, "Is it wise to be speaking about your leader like this?"

Matthew laughs, "Just as long as you don't get caught."

"I'm serious," Scott insists, "We are entrusting our lives into the hands of a guy who just came back to the Corps. How do we know if he still got it? How we know he's a good leader? How do we know if he hadn't gotten soft over time?"

"Something tells me he hasn't gotten soft," Matthew says suddenly serious, "I heard it in his voice, and he's as ready for combat as the rest of us are."

Scott scoffs at this, "Matt we don't even know his name, how can we rely on someone who won't tell us his own name?"

Rila tilts her head at this, "He told you his name," she says rather defensively, "His name is Rookie."

Again the small group of humans give her a strange look. She hates it when this happens; it makes her feel like a youngling who is just now discovering the workings of the world.

"Uh, Rila," Wolfgang finally voices, "Rookie isn't a name, it's a term we use for new people, like us," he gestures at himself, "We're Rookies because we're new and never experience combatâ€¦so I guess that makes you a Rookie as well."

Rila stares at him as she feels her intestines tighten. Rookie had lied to her. She shakes her head. No, Rookie isn't his nameâ€¦so what is it? And why doesn't he tell her? She doesn't know why, but she suddenly feels betrayed.

Almost as one, the small group turns their heads and look towards the podium. There is their Lieutenant as he checks his weapons, a rifle and submachine gun before placing on his helmet, oblivious of the searching eyes that are upon him.

Matthew holds up his hands as if to calm their minds, "Now wait a minute," he says slowly and carefully, "there are a lot of people with odd names. Maybe Rookie is his nickname or something."

"At least people with nicknames tell you their real names though," Wolfgang points out.

"Who knows," Anya says with a sly grin, "Maybe his name really is Rookie."

Scott rolls his eyes, "Chances of that are pretty low, not unless his name is Rook, like the bird, that would make sense."

"Why don't you just ask him," Rila finally asks, though, even in her

own mind, she can hear the almost pleading sound in her voice.

Scott shakes his head, "I ain't asking," he then looks at Rila, "Why don't you do it? You're his body guard, isn't he your best buddy?"

Rila slowly shakes her head, "I thought we were," she partially whispers. But she stands up and starts walking in the direction of their leader.

She is barely out of earshot when she hears Scott says, "He probably doesn't even drink."

\* \* \*

><p>With the delicacy of a mother, Rookie inspects the weapons before him.<p>

The first one he loathes yet loves at the same time. It's the modified version of the M7 Submachine Gun. A small gun specifically designed for close quarters, it packs a powerful punch along with its sixty round magazine. He has outfitted it with a silencer and a smart uplink scope so it'll be easier for him to view objects from afar. With this little weapon he can kill enemy combatants in one room without alerting any of their comrades in the next room. This SMG is strong and silent as Dutch would say, however it has its drawbacks. It takes nearly an entire magazine just to destroy a Brute's shield and it's nothing to boast about if range is needed.

With that Rookie shoulders the SMG before turning his attention to the rifle being held in his other hand. It is a DMR, a Designated Marksman Rifle, the crack shots favorite gun. It can be used in close quarters and long range engagement. It doesn't take a lot of shots to bring down a shielded enemy and the enemy himself as well. It is fitted with a 2X scope, multiple firing modes and it never jams. The design isn't seen often anymore since the UNSC has switched to using the new BR55 rifle, which only fires three round bursts, a feature that Rookie isn't fond of, which is why he is practically jumping with joy when he found this rifle.

He hears timid footsteps behind him and someone saying shyly, "Rookie?"

Rook holds the rifle in one hand as he turns and isn't really that surprised to see Rila.

However what did surprise him is that she isn't looking at him in the eye nor does she seem too happy at the moment.

He regards her for a moment before asking, "Yes Rila?"

She is silent for a moment before looking up at him and asks, "Why didn't you tell me your name?"

Rookie just froze on the spot. Of all the questions he expected her to ask, this wasn't one of them.

He thinks for a moment, trying to figure out how to tell her delicately, until finally he just says, "People call me Rookie all the time, so I just live with it."



She steps forward, "but you didn't tell me this was a title"do you not trust me?"

The sound of her delicate tone suddenly struck at Rook's core. He doesn't know what is causing him to react like this, so he just says, "I do trust you Rila, I really do."

Then, for the time, he hears her growl, a sound that he is all too familiar with on the battlefield. It took all of his restraint not to tense or show any signs of alarm.

"Then why would you not tell me your name?" she demands, "I told you mine."

Rook breathes deeply before answering, "Rilawe both come from different backgrounds, for you a name is a common thing, one that you share frequently with others, but for me" he looks into her eyes, silently pleading for understanding, "RilaI've lost everything that was dear to me, my family, my home, my friends, my name is the only thing that I have left and"

He just sighs and shakes his head, "I don't know, I justI don't like telling people about myself or giving anything away," he looks up at her, "I do trust you, but for nowcan you just call me Rookie?"

Rila still doesn't seem satisfied but she hisses, "As you wishRookie."

With that she turns around and stalks back to the small group of troopers in the back, leaving Rookie on the podium as he sighs. Rila doesn't have a temper, but when she gets madwell it looks like he just saw a small peak of the raging inferno she could become. He wonders if all Sangheili are like that.

Staff Sergeant West appears out of nowhere and steps up next to Rookie with a grin, "having trouble with your girlfriend sir?"

He turns to the Sergeant, but before he could say anything all the lights shut simultaneously off with a thud that causes the whole level to shudder.

Everyone freezes with what they are doing, all waiting to see what happens next. Suddenly the emergency lights spins up to full power and red light fills the room.

The PA system switches on and Rookie recognizes the voice of Captain Xeroxes.

"Attention ODSTs," booms a deep voice, "We ran into a little problem so we're deploying you now."

Rookie checks their position. They are close to their Rapid Citymore or less. The interior of the ship suddenly groans and it shudders again. Something really is off.

He looks back to the platoon who seems just as confused as he is.

"West," Rookie says as he turns to him, "get the other NCOs and get the Troopers into the pods now."

"Copy sir," West says obediently, all traces of his previous humor is now gone as he turns and sprints off the podium and into the crowd of soldiers.

Rookie does one last check on things when a thought enters his mind.

He quickly makes his way through the crowd heading to the back. It isn't long before he sees his guard and he calls out to her, "Rila!"

She turns at the sound of his voice and makes her way towards him. He gestures for her to follow and together they head to the pods. As they move Rookie notices that the chaos is slowly changing as the Sergeants calm their soldiers and gently guides them in their duties as they are directed to their selected pods. The more experienced Troopers already have their weapons and gear squared away, but the more green Marines were having difficulties. He needs to do a quick check with his men to make sure that they are all set for the upcoming drop.

Finally they reached the costumed built SOEIV. He turns to her and asks, "Give me your weapon."

"My weapon?" she asks confusingly.

Rook nods in confirmation right when the ship shook again. He's starting to have a sinking suspicion that he knows what's happening.

Rila holds her plasma rifle out to him without aggression; she appears to have pushed her agitation aside for now. Rook takes the gun carefully, unsure if it even has a safety, and turns to the pod. On the right side are two slots where a weapon can slide in, he wonders if it can hold non-human weaponry as well. His question is answered when he gently pushes the gun in and snaps into place. He tugs at it but is satisfied when it doesn't budge an inch.

He turns back to Rila and with a near formal sweep of his hand, gestures for her to enter. She is hesitant as she gazes at the pod; the insecurity in her eyes says it all.

Rookie restrains his growl of frustration as he walks up to her and says, "It's alright Rila, humans do it all the time, I'm sure you will be fine."

She still looks uncertain. Rookie isn't sure what makes him do it, but he suddenly reaches out and takes Rila's hand into his own. She appears startled by this, and Rook is sure he looks just as shocked but thankfully the helmet hides his expression.

"It'll be alright," Rookie mutters softly, "I'll see you on the ground when we land, alright?"

She breathes softly before nodding in acceptance. She takes her hand back, but he notices she did it slowly as she walks forward. She inspects the pod with a critical eye and even smells it before

eventually sitting inside it. It appears to be a bit snug with her having to lower her head slightly, but at the moment Rookie is just happy to see that she fits.

He walks up and inserts his head into the pod and starts to point out the different machinery and functions.

"These are the handle bars," he points at the horizontal steel cylinders close to her hands, he is slightly surprise how large these ones are, looks like it was made for Sangheilis, "you hang onto them when the trip gets bumpy" and it will get bumpy."

Rila nods as she places her hands on the devices, getting a feel for them.

"These monitors will allow us to communicate with one another," he continues, "and do you see these red buttons?" he gestures at the five crimson dots that are on either side of the door opening, "if the door gets stuck all you have to do is press them all down and it'll cause a small explosion to occur that'll help get you out, got it?"

Throughout the whole tutorial Rila has remain silent and just been nodding, so Rook steps out of his comfort zone again and rest a hand on her shoulder, "you alright?"

She finally looks at him and says, "I'm just"

"Scared?"

She hisses and stares at him with hard eyes, "I do not get scared Rookie."

Rook tilts his head, "Rila, it's alright to feel afraid," he gestures at the people around them, "Everybody here is scared, even I'm scared," he admits, "having emotion is just showing people that you have feelings you know."

She looks away and simply says, "Maybe"

Rook sighs explosively, he hopes Rila's Sangheili proud won't cause any trouble.

"Just wait for a moment," Rook says, "when everyone's in their pods, then we'll seal the hatches and we'll be on our way."

Rila nods in understanding, her hands clutching the handles tightly.

Rook merely shakes his head before walking down the line of pods. Most of the Platoon is all set to move, but some of the newer people still needed help. He has to help one trooper fit her SAW machine gun into her pod, help squeeze in gear and basically find a way to talk young and scared "rooks" to enter their pods. Occasionally he would run into a unique problem though.

"Reiter," Rook says, causing the young Wolfgang to become paralyzed with fear before Rook simply reaches into his SOEIV, "never leave a clip in your weapon as you drop," he instructs as he pops out the rifle's magazine, "even if it's on safety, the constant shaking could

cause a bullet to go off."

"Yes sir," the young Corporal says with his eyes downcast. Rook nods to him is about to walk away when the Marine says, "sir."

Rook turns back to Wolfgang, "yes Trooper?"

The young kid is quiet before looking up and asks embarrassingly, "do you have a mouth piece sir?"

Rookie is silent for a heartbeat before saying, "What?"

Wolfgang offers a shrug, "back in boot I almost bit my tongue off when we practiced dropping in by pod, so the instructor told me to make sure I have a mouth piece andâ€|well I lost mineâ€|" he trails off as he looks away.

Rookie wonders what to say, he doesn't have a mouth piece, but then he sees that Wolfgang is still holding the magazine and he holds his hand out, "let me see that."

Obediently the young Marine gives Rook the clip. Without missing a beat, Rook pops out a single bullet and looks at the Trooper, "open your mouth."

Wolfgang appears confused but he obeys and opens his jaws. Rookie then places the bullet in between the astonished Trooper's teeth, "see if that works," Rookie says seriously before continuing walking down the line.

Finally he reaches the end and nods in satisfaction; the platoon is ready. All shock troopers are set to drop, all except for him and one other Marine who rushes up to him.

"Sir," West says, "The Raiders are all set and ready to drop."

Rook releases a held in breath and nods. He's so nervous that he feels rivers of sweat already pouring down, but he doesn't show it. Instead he slaps the Staff Sergeant's shoulder and says, "Very good Sergeant."

He then gestures to the final two pods, "Then let's get going."

Alee gives Rook a grin before placing his helmet over his head. He then turns his blue visor to Rook and says, "Copy that Lieutenant."

**\*\*AN:** with school back on and my other stories, I'm sorry to inform you that updates will be slower; I hope you can understand and be patient. Thanks for reading and I hope you enjoyed.**\*\***

## 5. The Arrival

**\*\*The Arrival\*\***

Rila tries her best not to panic when the metal door closes, but she has never been pushed into such a small space before or be "dropped" to the surface of a planet.

The ship suddenly rocks again and the pod shakes with it. Her hands are already holding the handle bars, but she tightens her grip to the point that the metal threatens to bend. Why must humans use such feeble metal for everything?

She is about to let out a curse when the whole pod shakes up and down like a rattle. Her breathing intensifies when she feels herself moving, it is then that she looks up and through a clear transparent glass she can see the pod is indeed moving through what she guesses is a narrow passage within the ship. She is unsure where she is moving to, or even if she is on track, what if this is an accident and she needs to escape before the pod explodes, or worse?

However her thinking is interrupted when she feels a shuddering jerk and the scene before her changes. The metal interior of the ship has disappeared and her breath is cut as she looks out the window and glances downwards. She is outside the ship now and is practically dangling from the side of the space craft. They are above a sea of clouds with the Earth's single sun in the distance; she isn't sure if it's rising or if its setting, either way, the world looks dark and forbidding to her.

Suddenly a bright green ball of energy slams into the ship and causes Rila's small vehicle to rock severely. She tries to remain calm, but when she sees a part of the burning shuttle falling off the main body with what looks like a person falling with it, she experiences fear for the first time.

What if she dies here in the air and not on the ground? Will people even find her remains or even remember her?

Movement catches her attention and she looks around to see more of the pods surrounding her almost like great beasts within a heard. She wonders which one Rookie is in and if he is alright.

"Rila."

Rila is sure her insides flips over and almost stops working entirely. She looks to the point where the voice has originated and sees that it was coming from one of the small communication screens Rookie had showed her earlier. Looking back at her is a human trooper with his helmet on. She can't tell who it is, but she has a sinking feeling it is Rookie himself she is talking to.

"How are you feeling?" the Trooper asks.

Rila looks down again before gulping nervously as she says, "exhilarated"

Rookie chuckles, "Me tooâ€|but I'm guessing you're also nervous."

She didn't say anything, but he must have seen her form shiver slightly for he says, "Don't worry, once we're on the ground we'll-"

He is cut off as another blast of plasma hits the shuttle directly, causing the pods to all swing.

Rookie curses before saying, "We're dropping in a few seconds Rila,

get ready," with that the screen went blank and she is left alone within the small compartment. She tries to inhale normally, but with the constant barrage she is having a hard time remaining calm, and the constant motion of her pod isn't helping all too much either.

She is sure she is going to be sick, of anxiety or the constant rocking she doesn't know. Her insides jumble together when she hears a new sound within her small vehicle. She locates it and sees a column of bars on the upper corner of the pod, the bright lights is slowly reducing themselves until they reach the final bar. Rila has a bad feeling something is going to happen. She watches as the final bar's light lit up and died a mere second later she feels her pod being released and she feels herself dropping.

\* \* \*

><p>Rookie rises from his seat by almost a foot when gravity seems to come back into play and he is thrust back into his seat.<p>

He mutters a curse as he shifts around in the SOEIV, he always hated that first few second of the drop. The next part isn't so comfortable either as the pressure pushes him down into the chair, forcing him to grab the handles on either side of him as he continues his descend with the sound of the air rushing by outside.

He looks up just in time to see the \_Shanghai\_ get hit by additional plasma shells before the Frigate is lost as they enter the clouds. Despite this though, Rookie is still able to see the flash and burning metal of his fellow Trooper's drop pods alongside his. He tries to count them to see if they all made it out, but with them shifting positions and his own pod jerking so much he would often lose count or end up totaling the SOEIV he already tallied. He stops this procedure and looks down. They weren't that far off their mark from their LZ, but he can't help wondering if they're really as close as they thought they were.

His question is answered when they broke through the upper atmosphere and gains a full view of the land beneath him. A great big urban center stretches for miles all around, almost to the horizon, it's skyline rising more than three hundred stories into the skies. Before the war Rookie guesses it would have looked like Rio, all nice and shiny with an amazing history. Now however the sky looks as if it is choked with the black smoke that the burning city is emitting. The upper portions of the tall towers looks like they have been blown off and now sit like candles with their tops burning while hundreds of little buildings beneath them are no doubt being turned into rubble. It's a sad scene, one that Rook hoped not to ever see again, he could only hope that the civilians have gotten an advanced warning and had been evacuated before the fighting has started.

His eyes are then drawn to a sliver of silver on the ground that cuts through the city. It's the Grand Rapid River, it appears partially black and some parts of its path has been interrupted by a number of wreckage floating in it's path, but somehow it's still able to push through the barriers and continues its journey. Rook's eyes tries to scan the riverbank, trying to locate Outpost Phoenix, the ancient yet famous hotel, however with so many buildings blacken by fire it's hard to tell which structure is which.

Suddenly something flashes by and grazes the side of his pod. It was bright red and it left the struck metal exterior sizzling. His mind barely registered this when more plasma fire fills the air.

\_The Covenant sees us\_, he realizes, \_they're probably using turrets and Shades\_.

A bright green light slices through the air and hits one of the pods squarely in the center. The struck vehicle explodes into a fiery furnace as it slowly starts to burn. Rookie watches in horror as it starts to lose control and begins to tumble through the air, slowly falling apart as it goes. All that Rookie can do is hope that the Trooper had died in the blast, it would have been more merciful to be killed instantly then to be burn to a crisp slowly.

He has witness something like this happening before, but this time it's different. These are his men, the people he supposed to lead and protect. And he just lost one before they even made it to the ground.

He grits his teeth and silently prays that he loses no one else before they strike Earth. But every so often a pod is hit with a barrage of plasma or is hit by a fuel rod, thankfully though it looks like their SOEIVs are pulling through, no other pods are blown up, but that doesn't mean the Raiders inside weren't injured.

He is clutched with sudden dread as he wonders if Rila was the one in the destroyed pod. However before he could dwell on this further, the SOEIV gives a hard yank as if someone has just pulled it back and the wind outside his pod dies. He realizes the chutes have open and the after burners has kicked in as they attempt to lower him gently to the floor, which is just thirty feet away.

However he feels the pod suddenly jerk upwards and feels his rear end being warmed. The underside of his pod has just been hit. The fact has barley registered when there is an ugly moan of metal before he hears a snap and he feels the pod dropping uncontrollably once again. He looks up just in time to see the chute that was previously attached to his pod flutter away into the clouds. He struggles to remain in his seat as he begins to fall forward, which is worsen because now with the afterburners activated, they are now pushing him down with the speed of a bullet.

Before Rookie could curse a single word, the pod meets the ground.

He feels the jarring pain as his seatbelt is broken from the force of the crash and he lands on the cracking glass door that is now beneath him. He grabs the frame and hangs on as the after burnings counties to propel the pod forward, skidding it against the hard ground. He feels the SOIEV shudder and clang as it is no doubt bumping objects out of its way. For a moment Rookie wonders if he'll go on forever when he hears a chugging like sound and slowly the pod finally comes to a halt.

"Well this is brilliant," Rook mutters as he pushes himself up and examines his hand. His unprotected fingers have been scraped viciously by the metal, but not too badly, he can still fight. With that he gets into a crouch position, reaches up and pulls his two weapons down; the SMG and DMR rifle.

It is then that he takes stock of the situation. His platoon is under fire, the Covenant is probably on the prowl and his pod has landed on the side where the door is located. He thinks for a moment before deciding to take a risk.

He crouches even lower without placing his rear on the ground and sticks his weapons on his back as he makes ready to sprint. He breathes deeply and evenly, hoping he can make it without getting shot or squished.

After one more moment of rest he throws his fist out and slams it against the emergency explosive release buttons alongside the opening. There is a small beep of warning signaling that the explosives have been prime, and then comes the hiss as the exhaust is being released.

Rook loosens his muscles one last time when the door exploded. Unable to be pushed outward, the explosive force rebounded off the grounded door and instead sends the armored pod rocketing into the air. Rook takes off running, trying to get out of the way in case the near five ton SOIEV comes back crashing down on top of him. He hears a whistle of a falling object right above him. With that as encouragement, he sprints another yard before leaping and slides across the ground just when the pod lands a mere meter away from where Rook would have been standing if he had not slid.

He looks back and sees that it has landed right side up. However it starts to tilt over, forcing Rookie to trip over himself as he scrambles to his feet and rushes forward just as the pod crashes down again where he was lying a millisecond ago, another close call.

Rook looks back behind him, somewhat surprised that he is even still alive.

\_What a violate display of Newton's laws\_; he thought to himself as he unslings his SMG and carefully takes in his surroundings.

The city looks just as bad on the ground as it did from the sky. It has been colored either grey or black, all the buildings, street lights and vehicles have been coated in dust and ash. Trash, vehicles and discarded belongings litter the streets. Furniture pieces, kids' toys and suitcases have been thrown all over the place. Rookie is sure he would have smelled something foul if he took off his helmet when he saw the blood. It was everywhere, inside cars, on the sidewalks and covering the walls of the building. It isn't just crimson liquid though, there is also purple and dark red mixed with blue, indication that at one point or another, the Covenant forces once controlled this area. Rook's own blood becomes cold when he notices that the alien body fluid is fresh.

He goes down low and checks the map on his HUD.

No Signal

\_This just isn't my day\_; the Trooper thought to himself before rising again. He needs a terminal to up link the HUD with in order to receive data about the geographic area. The best place would probably be a school or a bar or maybe just somewhere out here in the open where there are grounded phone consoles set up.



He trudges through some garbage and presses himself against the wall of a building as he starts his search. He is in a residential area from the looks of it, they should have their own home terminals, but there is no doubt they have been locked with the family's security code and he doesn't have time to try and crack them. He scans the outside area once more looking for an open public console but soon gives up, almost everything that was left outside was no doubt destroyed by the fighting.

He sighs as he starts to jog alongside the wall with his gun out in front of him, ready to shoot if necessary. He does his best not too focus for too long on the destroyed street, but what else could he look at as he searches for a terminal?

As he moves he realizes something that causes him to pause as he takes refuge in an alleyway between two skyscrapers.

\_There's so much blood\_, he thought, \_but where are the bodies\_?

A sudden snap is sounded right next to his ear, causing him to crouch and turn to look behind him where the shot has come from. He sees a dark shape at the far end of the alley, hiding behind what looks like to be rubble of a partially collapsed building, but the rounded head is still exposed.

Rook puts the up link scope up next to his eye and makes ready to fire, but doesn't pull the trigger.

Plasma doesn't snap when it breaks through the sound barrier, only a bullet does and Brutes definitely do not use human weaponry.

"ODST!" he shouts, risking his identity, "UNSC Shock Trooper Raider, who's out there!?"

He hears a curse before a rather meek voice reply, "UNSC Shock Trooper Raider, coming out."

The dark figure reemerges with an Assault Rifle in hand and quickly makes his way towards Rook. The Lieutenant doesn't relax until the weak sun light reveals the emblem of the Raider Battalion; this guy is in his platoon.

"Is that you LT?" the Trooper asks as he takes up position opposite of Rook.

Rook nods his head while his HUD reveals the man's rank and name; Corporal Israel Skov.

"Got that right Trooper," Rook replies before looking up and down the alley again, "is there anyone else with you?"

Skov shakes his head, "Negative sir, we were dropping in formation, but I think those guns scattered us."

Rookie knows for a fact that the guns indeed scattered them, and on purpose too. No doubt hoping individual targets will be easier to attack than a united force.

\_My first mission as a Lieutenant and I already lost my platoon\_, he

thought bitterly, \_its New Mombasa all over again\_.

"We need to find Outpost Phoenix" Rookie informs the Trooper, "I've got no signal though, you?"

Skov tilts his head for a moment before shaking it, "Negative sir."

Rook sighs. Looks like the entire signal net is down, did all their tech get messed up from the drop or did something happen to the \_Shanghai\_? Or is it just an unbelievable coincidence that he met up with a Raider whose tech isn't working like his?

"Rally point is Outpost Phoenix," he finally says, "we need to find a terminal and get there as fast as possible."

The Corporal nods and says, "Sir."

Rook then takes the lead as they went down the street with Skov in the rear, occasionally turning in a circle and looking upwards, checking for snipers.

"Sir," Skov says.

"Yeah?" replies Rook.

"Sorry for that potshot back there."

"Don't worry about it," Rook says, "just remember if you do that again, next time I'm going to shoot back."

He is satisfied to hear the Trooper stumble behind him upon hearing those words.

\* \* \*

><p>Rila slowly opens her eyes as she awakes.<p>

She looks around in the small compartment she in as she tries to remember what happened. She recalls her small vehicle coming close to a tall structure when another pod bumped into hers and she crashed. Or so she thought.

When she looks outside her pod's window she sees that she is on the ground, in the middle of what she assumes to be a street. She bends low slightly and looks above her. She instantly recognizes the building she had hit, but now there is a gaping hole running close to its side. She ponders this for a minute before coming to the conclusion that she must have shot through the building.

She shivers, unable to believe that she is still alive, but happy nonetheless. She glances out once more unable to believe her eyes; she has finally reached a battlefield. She is finally going to fight.

She shifts her weight a bit as she gets ready to head out when she notices that her hands are still wrapped around the handlebars, which are now bent in a near snapping position.

She growls at herself, was this a sign of fear? She's a Sangheili

warrior; there is no room for fear.

Yet she remembers what Rookie had told her before they had left, how he admitted to her that the rest of the platoon is scared. How he was scared. That surprised her, leaders aren't supposed to admit that are they? And most certainly they themselves can't admit feeling afraid should they?

Rookie had comforted her though and told her how feeling fear is a way of showing her emotions. Perhaps that's how the humans bond, not through combat, but through feelings.

She pushes her unease aside for now as she slowly uncurls her hands and pulls them away from the bars. They are shaking slightly, but they obey her commands as she reaches out and grabs what looks like a handle on the bottom portion of the door. She is unsure if she is doing this correctly, but she pulls on the strange lever and releases it when she feels the device give a small vibration. As she let go, the door retracts itself as it soars upwards and it sides pulls away; leaving her exposed to the strange new world before her.

Cautiously she exits the pod and tumbles forward a bit, her legs feel weak and oddly numb at the moment. She looks up and turns in a slow motion as she takes in her surroundings. She remembers the human city she and Rookie were in earlier, Rio if she remembers correctly. It was a beautiful city whose appearance can rival that of any powerful keep back on Sanghelios. This place however has a feeling to it, as if fear itself is clinging to it.

It isn't sparkling or shining like Rio, and there is more urban structures than plant life, it might have looked beautiful in its original state. Now it lies in ruins. Smoke covers the skies and makes it hard to locate the sun, buildings seem to crumble every few minutes, and she smells the stench of death everywhere. She couldn't quite believe what she is seeing, she has heard that a conflict isn't as beautiful or as glorious as are described in mighty battle poems, but she has never expected to see something like this.

Hoping it'll reassure her a bit, she moves back to the pod she has just come down in and pulls out her plasma rifle and pistol. However as she glances around once more and looks back at her weaponry she soon begins to wish she has brought something much bigger than these.

She could only sigh as she clips her pistol to her belt before holding her rifle up in front of her as she examines her surroundings once more. She then has a horrifying realization; she has no idea where to go. She knew it was a tall tower that is called Outpost Phoenix that is resting alongside the river. She looks up and down the street she is on; she sees no sign of the building nor does she see the river.

She releases an agitated growl. She had seen the river when they were coming in, but after blacking out she no longer knows which direction the body of liquid lies now. After turning in circles for a couple more units, she decides to head up the road and hopefully she'll find at least some kind of sign of where the structure is located.

The whole city is a war zone, but at the moment it's quiet, all except for Rila, whose hooves softly claps against the ground as she walks.

She gulps nervously as she continues along the way, fueled with nervousness as much as fear. She soon wonders about her comrades; Matthew, Wolfgang, Scott and Anya, were they as lucky as she was in surviving? Or is it possible that they are-

A loud bang is sounded, causing Rila to jump and turn and stupidly fires a blast of plasma without even looking. The blue plasma hits a small pile of debris that has piled up on the floor, remnants of a wall that has fallen from one of the buildings.

She curses herself for her being so nervous, but she couldn't help it. She is in a war, she is lost and she is alone.

She surprisingly begins to wish for Rookie to be by her side. Though she is still a bit angry at him for being so secretive, she longs for his presence at the moment. She wants to feel him close to her, his warm hand touching her flesh and his rough yet soothing demeanor slowly comforting her. She is the one who is supposed to be protecting him, but she could not help feeling that he is the one looking out for her. The thought of that for some reason fills her with slight joy, she has always been considered a nuisance by all but her kin, to know a male, a male with no relation to her, is caring for her makes her feel good, she suppose.

Another crash sounds not too far from where she is at and she shuffles towards a nearby building. She holds her rifle in front of her as she presses her back against the wall for support as her legs starts to quiver a bit.

Suddenly there is a loud screech and before she knew what was happening, the wall collapse inward, causing Rila to fall in with it. Dust is launch into the air and blinds her as she falls and lands within the building she was leaning against not so long ago. She coughs a bit as she twists herself around in an attempt to right herself up while wiping the particles from her eyes. She stands but trips against what feels like a piece of the wall and lands flat on something; something that is cold, hard and fleshy in different areas. Her breath is caught in her throat as she forces her eyes to open.

She is staring into the empty eye holes of a human skull, with small remnants of red flesh still clinging onto it.

She jumps back in revulsion as her sight returns and she is able to see the gruesome scene before her. There, filling the entire interior of the building she is in, is a mountain of human remains. She can see them all, remnants of men, women, and children. All with their limbs spread out and flung in futile positions, but most of whom are missing their skin. Bones are revealed, small pieces of organs remains and the skulls, all of them, are grinning right at her. She sees the claw and teeth markings on the skeletons and knew what had happened; the Covenant, the Brutes, had eaten these people alive.

She feels a churning in her stomach, one that makes her want to gag. She has eaten meat before, but never from a being that was still alive and never in such a savage way.

Her eyes are slowly drawn to the body of a human so small that it didn't even look like a youngling; it looks like a newborn. The tiny

human has some flesh still intact, but it has turn slight yellow and now stinks, bringing tiny insects to feast upon it.

She shakes her head and forces herself to look away as she stumbles out of the building, but no matter which direction she looks she can still see the scene as vividly in her mind.

\_And we used to help to be apart of them\_, Rila thought to herself as she remembers her people being a part of the Covenant, \_no wonder the humans all hates me, if my people stood by while such horrors were committed, what else has been done\_?

Her head suddenly snaps up when she detects a sound; feet running on a hard surface. She takes cover next to the building's remaining wall, but is careful not to put any weight on it. She attempts to ready herself for a fight if any is approaching. She levels her plasma rifle and waits patiently.

Finally two human figures emerges from a narrow street, both are jogging and are clad in black armor with weapons at the ready.

Rila lets out a held in breath before walking out into the open and shouts, "Comrades!"

The Troopers turn with raised weapons, but they lowered them when they saw her and they moves in her direction. She watches as they run, all the while scanning the area, making sure there are no Covenant soldiers nearby.

Once they make it to her, one of the Troopers kneels and holds his rifle up as he looks around the street while the other human approaches.

Rila has a good idea who this human is because of his height, but it isn't until he speaks did she know for certain that it is Scott.

"Rila," he says as he holds his rather small weapon in one hand as he approaches, "glad to see you made it."

"And I'm glad to see you as well Scott," she says as she bows her head towards him before looking at the second human, "who is this?"

The human turns to look at Rila briefly before saying, "Sergeant Rohit Jaworski, leader of Raider Three-Three."

Rila cocks her head slightly, "Three-Three?"

"That's his designated squad," Scott explains, "My squad is Raider Two-Three, and you met them, Matt, Anya and Wolfgang."

Rila nods in understanding before asking, "Do you how to get to Outpost Phoenix?"

Here Rohit sighs to himself before turning his attention back to scanning his surroundings.

Scott slowly shakes his head, "We were hoping you would have some idea Rila."

Rila couldn't help but stare at him, "Me? This isn't even my home planet."

Rohit snickers, "Well when you put it like that I suppose that would make the most sense."

Scott shakes his head again before looking around at their surroundings before saying, "I think I saw the river in that direction," he says with a jerk of his head.

"Was this before you hit the ground or when the Covies were shooting at you?" Rohit asks, still not taking his eyes off their surrounding area.

Scott shrugs, "call it a hunch," he turns to Rila, "How about you Rila? Have any idea where we are?"

Rila thinks for a moment, "I do not know," she admits, "all I remember was--"

She is interrupted by three loud cracks that are immediately followed by sparks being ignited close to the Sangheili's feet. Rila jumps, while the two Troopers turn on their heels, and raise their weapons in the direction where the loud cracks have originated. She sees their fingers tighten slightly against the triggers of their rifles, but Scott's suddenly goes slack and he releases what sounds like a growl as he says, "hold fire."

Rila follows their gaze and is slightly taken back when she sees another Trooper heading towards them from a few units away, the rifle in his hand has a plume of smoke rising from his barrel. Rila tightens her grip on her own rifle as the Trooper approaches.

Scott walks forward and holds out his arms as he says loudly, "What was that Azim!? Trying to get us killed or what?"

Rila feels her throat tighten upon hearing this. Of all the people she was to meet alive, why her?

The said female continues walking before coming to a halt before Scott, appearing unfazed by his massive size as she shrugs, "have you ever heard of friendly fire Sergeant?"

Scott huff before releasing his held in air as he mutters darkly, "You know as well as I do that to intentionally aim and fire at another personnel isn't friendly fire; it's murder, plain and simple."

"Well she's still breathing isn't she?" Azim questions before turning her helmet towards Rila.

Rila has no idea why, but she suddenly views this as a challenge. She doesn't cringle, she stands tall and releases a small snarl, she is a Sangheili, and she will do well to let this female know that she is not a pitiful creature that should be trifled with.

Azim shows no sign of fear until Rila notices her grip on her rifle has tightened. Rila smirks at this.

"If you two are done," Rohit says as he walks up next to them, "I think we need to get a move on, because I for one don't want to get caught out here in the middle of the night."

Azim turns towards Rohit and scoffs, "Night? It's nowhere near evening yet Sergeant."

"It was nowhere near dark for the 107th Infantry Division when they got ambushed by the Covies during the battle of New Harmony either â€|Sarge," Rohit says.

Azim then says, "Don't try to act like a genius Rohit; you're lucky just to know how to say speak."

Rila finally growls and advances, she has had enough of this female.

Azim leaps back and is about to raise her weapon again when Scott steps between the two women.

"Enough," he hisses, "Dark or not, we need to get out of the open or we're be eaten alive."

The memory of the torn human's returns to Rila as she tries to repress a shiver, barely hearing Scott as he continues speaking.

"â€|So you had no contact at all?" Scott asks Azim.

"None," she growls at him through gritted teeth. If this female was raised on Sanghelios she would have been well discipline for her lack of respect, and Rila plans on giving her one as she tries to side step Scott, but he intercepts her.

"Enough," he says repeats, his faceplate looking directly into her eyes, "We'll continue this later, but for now we need to keep moving, clear?" he asks as he looks between Rila and Azim.

Rila growls but lowers her head in submission while Azim merely shrugs.

Scott sighs explosively, "I guess that's all I'm going to get," he says as he hoists his gun up, "alright let's move out."

Azim doesn't even look at Rila as she turns and starts trudging away, leading their small party. Rila growls as she follows the human female from behind.

As she walks, she hears Scott speaking softly behind her, "If the Covies don't kill us first, then I have a feeling these two chicks will."

She is baffled at what a chick is, but even more so when she hears Rohit chuckle at what Scott had said.

\* \* \*

><p>"How we looking Skov?"<p>

The Trooper looks down the range of his scope before reporting,

"Still clear sir."

Rookie nods at this as he checks his HUD again.

Uplink 89% completed

Rook wish this could go faster like in New Mombasa when Virgil helped him, but this city's AI was deactivated some time ago, whether it was done so officially or if it was destroyed by the enemy he has no idea.

The two Troopers are inside a dinner getting the uplink in place. Skov is standing watch at the door while Rook is behind the counter trying to hack into the console's main power drive. They have been holding the small building for minutes now as they attempt to get a heading. They have run into no trouble so far, but there is a sensation that both Troopers are feeling, almost like they are being watched. This causes Rookie to work faster.

His head suddenly jerks up at the same time Skov levels his rifle. They both heard it at the same moment, the splashing of feet going through a puddle. Rook is still trying to connect to the grid so he has to remain behind the small table, leaving Skov alone by the door as he wedges himself between the entrance and the wall, trying to get into a stable firing position.

Rook stands up as high as he could without leaving the signal's small sphere of influence as he takes aim with his MG with one hand.

The two Raiders wait for any sign of life, any sign that they are about to be assaulted in anyway. Rook strains his ears in an attempt to hear something; anything that sounds hostile in nature, one eye is locked outside while the other is carefully monitoring the uplink.

Finally figures begin to appear and Rook curses silently.

A few yards from the diner are an entire squad consisting of Brutes. The leader of the group, a creature that resembles a cross between an ape and a bear, tilts its massive head back as it sniffs the air before its red eyes settle upon the structure the two Marines are in and snarls. It then barks into the air, a loud sound that appears to resound off the surrounding skyscrapers. A heartbeat of silence passes before a cry similar to the first answers back.

Skov looks back at Rook as they both realize that the small squadron of Brutes are about to grow. This is confirmed when they hear the screeching of Jackals and the barks of Grunts rising in the distance.

A cold feeling of dread takes over Rookie as he pinpoints the sounds to be coming closer to their position.

Realizing they are about to make contact, Rook frantically gestures to Skov to join him behind the light barrier. The Trooper was more than happy to oblige. They hunker down, switches off their safeties and breathes evenly. However even Rookie starts to have trouble breathing when he hears the enemy closing in on them. That small squadron of Brutes sounds as if they have grown into a small army as their talks intensifies to the point Rook feels like they're riveting



within his head.

Rook glances at his HUD again.

Uplink 89% completed

\_This really isn't my day\_, Rookie thought bitterly.

No sooner did he think that did the chattering of the alien species suddenly cease.

Skov and Rook shares a small look of confusion at the sudden silence. Straining his ears some more, Rook is partially able to pick out the sound of scampering feet hitting the tile floor of the diner.

It's now or never.

Rook breaths as he whispers, "frag and clear."

Skov turns his faceplate towards Rookie, no doubt giving him a shock look, but slowly the Trooper nods, agreeing their only chance of getting out alive is to fight.

Rook grips his submachine gun, let's go of the console's wires and unhooks a grenade. Using his thumb, he pulls off the safety pin and looks at Skov and sees that he has copied Rook's action.

Finally the moment of truth, Rook's first combat order will either save their lives or ensure their place in a casket.

Without another thought, he pops the firing mechanism, feels it vibrates as it "cooks" and hurls the small object over the table with Skov mirroring him perfectly.

He hears two impacts and a startle squeal that quickly changes into a yelp. Skov covers his head while Rook shields the console with his body as the grenades finally explodes. He feels the heat wash over them as flames shoots over the counter and hears the confused and scared barking of the Grunts. Wasting no time, the two Trooper rises to their feet and brings their weapons to bear.

The tiny aliens that survived the blast stands in front of them appear dazed as they look about the diner in a muddle like state. The leader's beady red eye widens when the realization strikes it but it's too late. Without another second to spare, the Troopers release a hail of lead.

The MA5K in Skov's hands cuts through the enemy with the brutality of a blade while filling the room with its loud cracks as rounds discharges. Rook's SMG fires as well, but his gun makes no noise as it releases a barrage of bullets in rapid succession as it mows the aliens down.

Blood and dust are sprayed into the air as the rounds impacts against the alien's skin, their light armor doing nothing to protect them from the bullets. Finally after the first rounds have been fired, only a few seconds ago, the Grunts lay on the ground, their bodies broken from the projectile's kinetic energy.

Rook barley takers this in as he looks up and out the door. Crowded

outside of the diner's main entrance are large numbers of Brutes, Jackals and even more Grunts. They appear stunned with what they have just witnessed before the Brutes roar and bring up their plasma weapons, the rest of the Covenant soon follows suit.

The Raiders drop to a crouch again as the plasma and crystals are released. Above them red, green and purple blasts of energy fly over their heads and impact the opposite wall, tearing and burning the structure in the process.

Skov covers his head with a hand as he starts to hyperventilate as plaster and dust begins to rain down on them. Rook checks the uplink, hoping for some good news for once.

Error, please try again at a later time

Rookie stares at the small message with disbelief before releasing a steady stream of curses that only he can hear. This isn't good, they're pinned down in a building that wasn't made to withstand against this magnitude of fire, and they need to get out of here before it's too late.

"Skov!" Rook screams over the whine of plasma, "Get ready to move!"

"Move Where!" Skov screams back, "we're cut off!"

"Shoot and scoot!" answers Rook, "We're going to stand up, empty our mags and run to the back of the building got me!?"

"Yeah! Yeah!" Skov says, "I read you!"

"Ok!" Rook chambers in a new clip, "On Three!"

"One!" Skov grips his rifle tightly.

"Two!" Rook loosens his muscles before taking in a big breath.

"Three!"

They both stand in the middle of the firing energy balls and release their own pent up fury as they fire while their world seems to have slowed to a crawl. Rook shakes a bit as he fires silence pops into the crowd while Skov's barrages bang away. They concentrate their fire out the doorway which is filled with bright lights that almost blinds the ODSs.

The plasma fire starts to lighten, whether it is because the Troopers actually hit them or surprised them Rook has no idea, nor did he care.

"Out the back door!" he shouts over the carnage, "Now!"

Skov continues to fire until his gun finally runs dry of ammunition and his barrel starts to steam. With that, he turns and sprints through the door that leads to the kitchen. Rook covers him for he still has more bullets on his clip than Skov's gun, but he runs empty only a second after Skov did.

Following after the Corporal, Rook gets down low and scurries into the back. No sooner did he enter the backroom, the fire intensifies as the Brutes roar out new orders. Rookie and Skov half crawl and half ran through the small kitchen as plasma rounds goes though the weak walls and impacts the objects within the room. Rook's spirit rose a fraction when he sees the door up ahead. Skov must have seen it as well for he stood up some more and sprints forward. Rook copies the younger soldier and together they rush to freedom.

A sudden hiss causes Rook to look back and his eyes widen. One of the plasma rounds has struck the oven and judging from the small flame that has just ignited, there is still gas within the cooking machine.

He turns back and shoves Skov out the door right when he hears an explosion. All that Rook feels moments afterword is him being lifted into the air, his back becoming incredibly hot and he hears Skov shouts something before he blacks out from the unbearable heat.

\* \* \*

><p>"Stop that."<p>

Rila looks up at Azim who is in front of her, confused by the Sergeant's sudden words.

"Stop what?" The Sangheili asks, figuring it is her that Azim is referring to.

"Breathing on me," she answers coolly, "it reeks."

Rila growls in anger and frustration, wanting to rip the human apart even more.

A small tap on her shoulder causes her to look behind to see Rohit who simply says, "switch," and before Rila knew what happen, Rohit moves forward and forces Rila to take a step back as he wedges himself between the two females. Azim appears annoyed at this new formation but trudges on.

Rila eyes her with cold fury before returning to her duty. Scott has asked her to watch the side streets and alley ways as they travel within the shadowy confides of the buildings. They move with such fluid motions that Rila has to admit she is impressed, she has never seen anyone be so quick yet careful at the same time. She can now understand why it was they were made into squad leaders.

Which is why she feels a bit embarrassed when she causes the most noise, no matter what she tries, her feet keeps coming down with frequent cracks as her hooves hits the pavement. She wasn't really well designed to move with secrecy.

She suddenly clamps her mandibles shut in a way to keep herself from laughing. She must look ridiculous, a female Sangheili trying to run with grace while in company with three bulky armored humans.

Never in her life has she imagine herself to be where she is now, it is a bit exciting now that she thinks about, but deep down she is actually worried. They have yet to run into any more human Raiders and they would hear the occasional sounds of battle echo through the

ruin city. The few times they tried to make their way to the source of the disturbance, but the massive metropolis is like a maze. It fills Rila with fury and guilt as they are forced to hear what she presumes to be her comrades fighting in a hard battle and they are unable to do anything to help. The only thing that got her and the others excited is when Scott spotted a sign hanging from a pole that is barley standing. She couldn't read it, but there is a tiny image next to the scripture words portraying blue liquid flowing down a waving curve; she guesses that this is pointing them in the direction of the river.

However they have been traveling for units on end and the only body of water they have found were small mucky puddles in the middle of the streets. She can tell that everyone, even Scott, is starting to get agitated with their situation. Rila has to admit she herself feels like lashing out with no apparent reason.

They come to a quick halt when they feel a light tremor run through the ground for a moment before it settles. They wait for a few units, but nothing else is happening.

"What was that?" Rila asks.

Rohit looks around before saying, "might have been an explosion, but I don't see the source."

Scott is silent before saying, "might be a building collapsing."

"Or artillery," Azim hisses, "I just hope it's aimed at the..." she suddenly becomes silent as she looks down the street with renewed interest. The squad soon mimics her as well, looking down the street to see what caught her attention.

"What?" Rohit finally asks.

Azim is silent before whispering back, "I think I saw movement, like something walking close to the corner of our block."

"Was it a species of the Covenant?" Rila asks.

For once Azim doesn't shoot her a glare, instead she just shakes her head, "I don't know, didn't get a good look."

The squad waits another unit before Scott orders, "move with caution."

Azim nods before leading the way forward, moving with a slow gait that the others soon match. A feeling of excitement courses through Rila but it is also tinted with dread. Will they finally get to fight? And if they do, will they be well trained to handle it?

Her thinking ceases as they stop at the corner of the building. She can sense Azim breaths slowly before easing her helmet close to the edge. They all tense as her helmet is partially exposed in the open, but they hear her exhale as she shouts, "friendlyes!" before walking out of cover.

The remaining three look at each other in momentary confusion before following Azim and comes to a halt in slight surprise.

Standing in the middle of the road, looking completely at ease was a human soldier. He certainly look odd to Rila, his clothes are torn, his weapon and armor bears multiple scratches and burns, showing that he has been in combat. Yet what surprises her is that the human, a male whose fur is starting to grow to the same length as a female, looks calm, maybe even sleepy for their are black circles under his eyes and his skin looks pale and almost sickly. He has something in his mouth, a small brown cylinder with its end on fire but the warrior doesn't seem concern, he doesn't look the least bit concern at the sight of the Troopers, or Rila for that matter.

The soldier breathes in deeply before releasing a plume of smoke. For a unit Rila thought he was breathing fire until he opens his mouth and speaks.

"'Bout time you got here," he says in a slow voice as he continues to regard Rila.

She in turn studies him for a moment before asking confusingly, "You knew I was coming?"

"Of course we did," the soldier removes the burning cylinder from his mouth and waves it around a bit as he tilts his head back and looks at the sky, "now where's the rest of your army?"

Now Rila understands though she doesn't know how to explain her situation to the odd human.

Luckily Scott steps forward and says, "actually soldier, the Sangheili is attached to our unit, it's just us ODSTs, we-"

"Yeah I know who you are," the soldier interrupts before sucking on the cylinder again, "saw you drop in, 'bout time you showed up Mr. Supreme Fifi."

"It's Semper Fi," Rohit puts in.

"Well ain't that nice," the soldier drawls out, "good for you, I guess that means yall not as hard headed as we originally thought you were."

"Enough," Azim says, "we're looking for Outpost Phoenix, do you know where it's at?"

"Outpost Phoenix?" he asks with a odd grin, "I think you mean Outpost crap hole."

Rila looks at Scott and asks, "does this mean we are in the wrong place?"

"Oh for the love of..." Azim mutters before standing tall and says, "Soldier, take us to the Outpost now and I won't let the hinge head eat you."

Rila was struck dumb by what Azim has said. She never ate a human before, and the sight of the carcasses she had seen earlier encourage her not to practice the act. Besides, she wouldn't eat the human even if she wanted to, from the way he looks and smells, its quite clear he'll make anyone sick.

The soldier however doesn't even appear concern, in fact, there's no emotion at all within his eyes, he just flicks the cylinder away with his fingers and says, "right this way little lady," and starts walking off without checking to see if they are following.

Rila is sure Azim is about to explode as her whole body starts to shake, but Scott pushes her after the male.

Turning her attention back to the soldier, Rila asks, "What's your name?"

The human doesn't look back as he says, "I'm called Steven by my friends, boot by my peers, stupid by my superiors, 'grr' by the Brutes, 'squeak' by the grunts, and 'caw, caw' by the Jackals."

"What's your rank?" Rohit asks, "we're all Sergeants here you know."

The man, Steven Rila guesses just laughs, "well sir," he slurs out the last word, "as far as I can tell it don't matter what my rank is, the Covies will kill me whether I'm a Private or a General."

Rila starts to worry that the human they are following is insane when they feel another tremor, this time it came from above. They look up just in time to see the shadow of a Frigate being outline by a powerful green blast before disappearing behind the clouds again. They wait another few seconds before they see something large tumbling through the sky and strikes the Earth. The ground shakes with an unrelenting rumble that causes six skyscrapers to collapse as the ODSs and Rila brace.

Rila feels dread fill her as she looks up. Sticking up some cycles away from them is the lower portion of a human shuttle, a ship that looks just like the one they have dropped from earlier.

Steven walks up next to Rila, sticks another cylinder into his mouth and pulls out a small object from his pocket. He opens a small compartment, picks out what looks like a tiny splitter of wood and runs it down the side of a building. She is momentarily surprised when the stick came alit with fire. Calmly as ever, Steven puts the stick against the cylinder in his mouth until it caught fire. He threw the stick down while sucking on the burning object, his eyes still as emotionless as ever.

"Looks like somebody is having a bad day," he remarks dully.

Rila has no idea why, but she is starting to dislike the sound of the person's voice.

**\*\*Sorry it's taking so long to update, my free time has been limited lately.\*\***

**\*\*On a small note, if you're curious about the progress for the next chapter, I posted a Chapter Statues Chart on my profile if you're wondering which story I am working on and how far along I've gotten it.\*\***

**\*\*As always thanks for reading and I hope you enjoyed.\*\***

## 6. The Lost

### **\*\*The Lost\*\***

A dull throbbing is the first thing Rookie feels as his mind starts to wake.

He tries to remember what happened, what caused the throbbing and where is he now?

Forcing himself to ignore the pain, Rook then realizes that he is moving, but it isn't his legs that are pushing him forward. In fact, his legs are being dragged along the rough surface of what he believes to be asphalt, considering that a series of clicks are being released every so often from where his limbs are located. He then focuses on something else, a conversation that is not being told in the human tongue. He hears the series of squawks and hisses originating from either side of him, where he feels his arms are being pulled.

His helmet feels heavier than usual, like there is now a ton of bricks being balanced on top, but he musters his strength and forces his head up while also peeling his eyes open.

They are still in the city, surrounded by the dull grey buildings and under the smoke filled skies with mountains of debris on either side of him. Then he sees it, the big hairy hulking mass, a Brute, walking in front with three smaller figures follow it from behind. The other three beings are of different species that takes him a moment to identify. The creature in the middle is human, more specifically, a human wearing in the black body armor of an ODST. The Trooper is being dragged forward by two bird-like creatures that are flanking him, a bit taller than the average human, sickly looking skin with twitchy movement that reminds Rookie of a bird, the Covenant species most commonly referred to as Jackals.

A sudden screech brings a stop to their journey. At first Rookie thought they are at an end of the journey when he feels a sharp slap hit the right side of his helmet. The unexpected blow caught him unprepared and sends his head to one side before another hit from the opposite side twists his skull back around again. Rook is trying to anticipate the next bout of agony when his body is pushed to the pavement. He shoots his hands out and tries to get back up when a solid object slams into the back of Rookie's helmet and he hits the ground hard, causing him to see black and red stars to pop in his vision.

He hears a snap followed by a gruff. He feels his arms shake a bit as if the people holding his arms are shivering with nerves. They brought Rook back up to a kneeling poise before continuing to drag the trooper along.

In the back of his mind, Rookie begins to panic. The Covenant never takes prisoners; there are only two reasons why they are bringing him and Skov along. They are either bored and are hoping to entertain themselves by torturing the two Raiders. Or they are hungry for some human meat.

This is not how it's going to end; the least he can do is kill some

of these Covies before being torn to shreds. Wait, no, he's a platoon leader now, and Skov is still here. If they get a chance he has to help him escape and they can get away together. If worse comes to worse, then he'll sacrifice himself so that Skov can make a run for it.

However he sees no window of escape. They are being dragged down deeper and deeper into the city, he isn't sure if he is being dragged away from where they were attacked, for all he knows they're heading in the same direction the two Troopers had journeyed from. At this point though, all the streets looks the same to him, but every time he tries to raise his head to get his bearing's one of the Jackals would slap the back of his head and he is forced to look down, unable to see any landmarks. All he can see is pavement after pavement, occasionally he would be dragged across some rubble or jerked to either side like a rag doll, but other than that, no other movement is permitted.

He tries counting the seconds, the minutes, but they seem to be going by in a blur. He would get his head kick or be shoved to the floor every so often, making it harder and harder for Rook to focus. It isn't until he reaches what he thought to be the eight thousandth second when he finally realizes something.

Whereas he is being shoved and hissed at, causing most of the noise apparently, Skov has been quiet for far too long. Rook hopes against all hope that Skov is just unconscious, but if he hasn't wake yet then he is either dead or he has some form of a concussion.

Some combat leader he is turning out to be. He is losing his men without even having the chance to fight for them, they are lost, and his command resulted with him and his man being captured. Rook feels tears of frustration and anger stinging his eyes but he wills them away. He can't break down now, he is still alive, and until he knows otherwise, he needs to get to Skov and get him out of here as well.

He doesn't struggle, he might push the Jackal's limit and they may either kill or cripple him to the point of him being considered dead weight. As much as he hates to deny it, he needs to wait until the odds shift in his favor or risk getting himself and Skov killed.

He slowly begins to count again, starting from one, but in the back of his mind he wonders if the rest of his platoon is alright. And, oddly enough, if Rila in particular is alright.

\* \* \*

><p>"Well here it is," Steven says, "Outpost Phoenix in all its glory."<p>

"Homey" Rohit says in a less than thrilled voice, "do the cockroaches and rats get their own floors or what?"

"We share the same rooms," Steven says with that odd slow grin, "I hope you like midnight visitors."

Rila is really starting to dislike this human almost as much as Azim, but she puts this aside as she gazes at the building before them.



It's a tall black tinted structure with a massive courtyard complete with isolated trees amid the cement sidewalks, looking just like how the hologram showed them, but it looks even bleaker than it originally did. The banner that welcomes travelers is now hanging on by a single piece of rope that looks as if it's barely hanging in there. The large hole in the center of the building is still smoking, but aside from that and the smoke clogged air it appears untouched. This however doesn't put Rila at ease; it has this feeling about it, haunting, almost like this place is cursed. The sight of the humans inhabiting the place only further supports her theory.

Scattered on the steps of the front entrance is a small contingency of human Soldiers, all of them looking defeated. Their green armor are covered in dirt, grime, ash and what appears to be dried blood, some red, some purple and one even has a splash of yellow on his helmet. They have vacant eyes as they stare into the distant, their expressions mutual as they suck on the brown cylinders that Rila had seen Steven use earlier. They all have weapons so she suppose they are charged with protecting the opening, but their lack of alertness is almost sickening to the warrior bred Sangheili.

The small group makes their way up the stairs, as they do so Azim looks at one of the so called defenders and asks, "Enjoying yourselves Soldiers?"

One of them, a male sitting within distance of the Trooper, mumbles something. Azim immediately whirls around and stands beside the man, no doubt glaring from within her helmet.

"What did you say army puke?" she demands the offender.

The soldier doesn't reply, instead he holds up his hand and makes some sort of gesture with a finger. Rila doesn't know what it is that the soldier's movement meant, but when she sees Scott shakes his head, she knew that something was going to happen. And it did; Azim grabs the finger that is being held up by the soldier and jerks it back, causing a loud snap to be heard.

The Soldier howls and wrestles his hand from Azim's grasp as he cuddles his wounded finger against his chest, whimpering in pain. Rila is surprised by this sudden and vicious action, but that's nothing compared to what she sees next. The other Soldiers, even the woman who is sitting next to the offending male, didn't appear alarmed by what just occurred. Nobody rush to the aid of their injured, they didn't even blink.

A dark thought crosses Rila's mind that is disturbing yet true, \_they've grown use to the suffering\_.

The other Troopers didn't seem surprise either, but then again their expressions are hidden behind glass. They merely look at each other, look to Rila, and continues on inside, with the Sangheili bringing up the rear.

The room they enter is massive, and judging from the odd looking carpets and strange, yet impressive artworks hangs on the wall it was once held in great admiration, but not now in the wake of an oncoming war. The ceiling's bright colors have started to peel and are now covered in dust. Velvet furniture pieces, long and clearly

well-crafted tables, have been pushed to the center where a small group of soldiers are sleeping. OR so Rila thought, as they approach she notices the bandages covering the people and the small whimpers the group is emitting, she realizes that they are wounded. The only other thing in the room is a machine positioned in the back where its producing blue light and is displaying a holographic image of the building they are now in. Residing next to the mechanism, either standing, sitting, or lying on the floor, are a rather abundant number of humans, all wearing black armor gear.

Rila has just been enfolded within this small group of warriors not too long ago, yet for some reason she couldn't help but feel a surge of relief course through her at the sight of them.

One of the Raiders saw them approaching and quickly jumps up from where he or she was sitting before stumbling towards them. Rila is sure the Trooper is going to welcome back the trio of Sergeants, instead though, the person looks past them and looks directly at Rila.

"Privyetiki!" a familiar voice shouts from behind the helmet as the Raider raising his, or rather her, hand up in greeting.

Rila smiles, she has no idea why, but being singled out and welcome like a fellow companion makes her feel greatly appreciated.

"Greetings Anya," Rila says as she bows her head respectfully, unable to repeat whatever word that Anya had offered to her.

It is then that the other Troopers notices their arrival and quickly stands up to greet them. Rila scans the crowd; out of the forty Raiders that she had seen on the ship she could only count up to twenty. She searches the room for Rookie, but doesn't see him, then again his armor set is similar to everyone else's, maybe he is here and she just can't identify him.

Anya is likewise looking at Rila's small group before she looks back at the Sangheili and asks, "have you seen Matt or Wolfgang?"

Rila's gut twists once more before she shakes her head, causing Anya to drop her head, probably in sorrow. How could it be that the small number of humans who have accepted Rila as one of their own ends up missing or dead before the cycle had even ended?

She is brought out of her gloom when Scott asks in a loud voice, "Is the LT here?"

Rila feels her hearts pump even faster when a nearby Raider shakes his or her helmet covered head, "Negative," responds a male voice, "we haven't seen him and almost half our numbers are missing as well."

"What about Sergeant Alee," Rila asks but soon regrets. The two Marines turn to her, she wonders if its wrong of her to ask a question without being indicated to do so.

The Marine though shakes his head, "Staff Sergeant West isn't here either," he looks back to Scott, "that would put you next in line of command Scott."

Rila watches as her friend stiffens a bit as he looks around at the gathered Raiders. She didn't have to be an expert on humans to know that the newly appointed leader is feeling nervous.

Scott seems to be in deep thought for a while before he asks, "Who's in charge here?"

Before the trooper could respond, a new voice interrupts, "that would be us."

Rila and the other newly arrived Troopers turn and sees two men, two soldiers, approach them.

They walk together, but in Rila's opinion they seem to contrast greatly. One of them is of average height for a human, his middle seems to bulge for some reason, he is also carrying a rifle on his back and the fur doesn't cover the full width of his cranium. He walks with an obvious stiffness, his actions jerky and a bit uncoordinated, but what scares Rila are his eyes. His eyes are just as empty and just as blank as Stevens, for a moment she wonders if everyone here is like that.

Her question is answered when she observes the other human. He is short, probably just reaching up to Rila's hip, but he walks with a confidence that reminds her of a Sangheili Keep lord. His feet are spread wide apart, his chest is broad and he appears to be standing tall. Fur covers not just his head, but also on his chin, resulting with it covering his mouth.

Rila would have laughed at the sight of this male, but that is until she sees his eyes. They are dark, but not empty, on the contrary, they are ablaze with some unknown uncontainable energy. Just that small detail is enough to tell Rila everything she needs to know; this is a human she and the other Troopers can trust and rely on.

The near trembling male who she had notice first is silent when they reach the Raiders; in fact, he is trying to avoid looking into their eyes. His companion however steps forward and holds out a hand to Scott.

"First Sergeant Fredric Long," the man says as Scott grasps his hand, "now acting commanding officer of the Five O First Armor Division, or what's left of it."

Scott nods at him, "Master Sergeant Scott Wiley," he pauses as he looks over the Troopers once more before looking back, "acting CO of First platoon of the ODST Raider Battalion."

Long gives Scott a long hard stare before looking back to his comrade and says, "And that sorry looking excuse of a soldier is Lieutenant Elmer Stranks."

The indicated Lieutenant doesn't even respond at the sound of his name. Long bumps his shoulders against Stranks and says, "Is that right LT?"

The man blinks once and looks to Long as if he is just now noticing his presence, "What was that?"

Long says, "Right LT?"

"Oh," Stranks bobs his head, "yes, right, copy that." He then looks down at a device attach to his wrist before saying, "I need to call HQ, take over will you Master Sergeant." Without another word, the Lieutenant turns on his heels and walks out, not even looking the least bit surprise by Rila's appearance; in fact it doesn't look like he saw anything at all.

Anya makes an odd piercing sound, like a whistle that has a two note tune in it. The Sangheili wonders if this is some sort of human custom.

Scott turns to Long, "what's with him?"

"The same sob story as every rich kid," Long replies, "parents want a war hero, he gets shipped off to North Star Academy, never been in a fight in his life and someone at FLEETCOM thought it would be a good idea to stick him with us and see how it goes."

"And how did that work out?" Azim pips in.

"Well considering he and his men are now in what looks to be the twilight zone," here the Master Sergeant shrugs, "I'm guessing that alone sums up the situation."

"What about the line?" Scott asks, "We got shot at by the Covenant and from the sound of it they are on this side of the river."

"The line was established and destroyed on the first day," Long answers as he takes out a brown cylinder and places it in his mouth but does not light it, "that was when the LT broke down and it wasn't long before his boys follow suit. My Tankers are Marines compared to those slackers."

"Where are your tankers?" is Scott's next question.

"They're manning the perimeter, but I think Steven here," he nods at the soldier who led the Troopers in, "just proved to you how thin our perimeter is, Covies are practically walking right past us and doesn't even know it. If it wasn't for the occasional skirmish they have with our tanks than they would have advanced by now."

"How many tanks do you have?" this time it's Rohit who spoke up.

"About seven, damaged but workable, three are grounded, seventeen are busted and nine are missing somewhere in the city, or they were destroyed and we just don't know about it yet," Long reports.

"Do you have any resources that could be used?" Scott asks once more.

Long chuckles, "A squad of ODSTs, I hope you're as good as they say."

"So do I," Azim mutters, earning a long and probably cold stare from Scott.

There is a moment of silence before Long asks, "so what now Sergeant?"

Scott pauses for a long while before saying, "I want to take a look at all the weapons, defenses and people we have, the better idea we have the better defense we can create."

Long smiles, "Well you better have a plan to move Heaven and Earth Sarge, cause that's what it's going to take to turn this fight around."

"Just show me what we have and I'll be the judge of that," Scott says with an edge to his voice.

The man shrugs once more before turning and leads the way out the door.

Scott is about to follow when he pauses and turns to the remaining Troopers, "eat and rest," he orders, "we're going to have a long stay here." With that, Scott follows Long out the door.

Azim wanders off to join a small squad of Troopers and Rohit does the same, leaving Rila standing alone. Or almost alone, that's when she looks down and remembers Anya is still by her side.

"Soâ€|" Anya says as she tilts her head back so she can gaze into Rila's face, "how's your day going?"

\* \* \*

><p>Rook can't look up to see it, but he smells it first; he smells the distinct aroma of water.<p>

As ironic as it seems, the Covies had dragged him and Skov across the city to the very place the pair of ODSs were trying to get to. The smell of chlorine and sewage is strong and he is sure he can here the soft lap as a body of water moves, probably down the river trail.

By now Rookie has a splitting headache and he's having trouble thinking straight, forcing him to mumble under his breath as he tries to keep his priorities in order. Get Skov out, follow if can; do not allow himself or any other human being to be captured by the enemy.

A loud yell rocks Rook's world and he jerks his head up to see what's going on. His Jackal guards are just as curious as Rook; they didn't even seem to notice that he is now holding his head up.

In front of them, Skov's form suddenly comes to life as he jerks within his captor's hard cold grasp.

"What Happen!?" he screams, "Where am I?! Where am I?!"

Rook sees that the Brute leader pauses and turns to the wailing Trooper. You didn't have to have a PhD in alien studies to know what this creature is thinking of.

"Skov!" Rook shouts, "Calm-" he is interrupted when the Jackals punches him in the gut, forcing the armor to bend a bit and poke his innards.

"LT!?" Skov tries to twist himself around, "Where are you!?"  
What-"

He is silenced when the Brute throws one meaty paw and with one loud crack, he causes Skov's helmet to twist around until the visor is facing Rookie.

His teammate is in danger. He can't stand by and watch as his fellow Marine gets pounded. Rookie struggles again, trying to break free from his guards hands, but they hang on with a death grip, using all of their strength in keeping the Trooper contained so they didn't have enough stamina to strike at the ODST for his struggling.

The Brute roar as it rams a huge fist into the Marine's chest and causing him to rise off the ground by a few feet before coming back down on the street, his screams now have been reduced to pained wheezes.

"Stop!" Rook shouts amidst his own struggle, "I'm the leader! I'm the one you want!"

He knew that the chances of the Brute knowing what it is he is saying is pretty slim, but the alien ceases his fun and looks at Rookie. His ugly face snarls as he juts out his teeth for effect before lumbering towards Rook. The Lieutenant has no idea whether he made the right choice or not, but it doesn't matter, the massive bruiser is now in front of him, a good two or three feet taller than he is as it growls at him.

Rookie in turns rises as high as he could in an attempt to defy the hulking monster before him. The being makes a deep rutting sound in its throat as it reaches down and pulls out a Red Plasma Rifle. Realizing that the Brute has no interest in having a prisoner, Rookie tries to lean out of the way, but the Jackals grab hold of him and keeps him steady, well within sight of the plasma weapon.

The monster releases a low growl as it pulls the trigger and the end of the rifle burns red with energy. It's happening so quickly that Rook could barely register that this is the end of the line for him.

Yet what surprises him most is that this is his final moment, and in that instant all he sees is a mental image of Rila. He remembers her voice, her soft skin, her eagerness and how they seem to share a special kind of bond that Rook couldn't really explain. He just prays that she'll be alright wherever she is.

He holds his breath, and awaits his fate when suddenly he is envelope in a shadow. The Brute notices this too and looks up at the same time as Rookie did. His eyes widen when he sees a large chunk of metal falling downwards at breakneck speed. Acting more out of instinct than anything else, Rook plants his feet down in a slanted position and shoves himself backwards. The Jackals were too busy trying to hold his upper limbs that they didn't really take too much care in watching Rook's legs, thus throwing them off balance as all three of them are sent wheeling back.

The Brute roars and raises his rifle again, completely forgetting the falling object until it's too late. With a Earth shuddering

explosion, the giant hunk of metal lands directly on top of the alien, causing it to disappear from view.

The small crowd stares in stunned silence at what just had occurred and Rookie feels even more astonished when he identifies what the giant hunk of tin is. It's a SOEIV pod.

Everyone, human and Jackal alike, are staring at the drop pod as if it's a sign from the Heavens, but in Rookie's point of view, he sees it more like a gift from God himself.

Suddenly there is a hiss and the door on top of the grounded pod contracts to the side and a helmet figure rises from the interior. The person quickly rips off the helmet, hangs over the side and pukes, all the while the captured ODSs and their captors continue to gape at him.

Finally the person retains control of his stomach and sits up. Rookie couldn't believe his eyes when he sees that it's Wolfgang Riter, the kid who was asking for a mouth piece ages ago.

At that same moment, Wolfgang froze when he sees Rookie and looks extremely confused in the situation he is in. He then looks behind him and no doubt sees Skov as well before looking back to his Lieutenant.

"What justâ€¦" before Wolfgang could finish his question, the Jackal squawks as it reaches down and hefts up its Needler rifle, unaware that it just left Rookie with an opening.

With one of its hands no longer holding him back, Rookie shoves hard against the Jackal with the pistol, causing its purple rounds to go wild as its shots are messed up. The needles however, turn and home in on Wolfgang, no doubt sensing his heat and calculating that he is the target. The young Trooper reacts with a yelp as he falls back inside his pod, resulting with the needles either hitting the side of the SOEIV or passing over it.

While this occurs, Rookie is able to wrench his hand out of the Needler-wielding Jackal's hand, curls his now free fingers into a fist, turns and gives a hard swing as he strikes against the other alien. Rookie's fist stings from the impact as it strikes the creature's hard beak, but he is rewarded when the Jackal stumbles back and releases Rookie.

Wasting no time, the Trooper returns his attention back to the Jackal with the weapon and throws himself at it, bringing it down with the astonishing force. The alien creature is stronger than Rookie and they both know it, the best that the human can do is to try and be elusive while also daring, all at the same time. The Jackal tries to push Rookie off, but he starts to flop around like a fish, shifting his weight and making it more difficult for the Jackal to get a firm hand on him. He attempts to hit it, but the Jackal is able to use one of its arms, knocking Rookie's fist aside while squawking in its odd language all the while.

The sharp clops of hooves is the only warning the Trooper gets of the incoming danger as he rolls off the alien he was trying to subdue. As he rolls he tries to reach for his combat knife but finds his sheath empty, his blade must have been taken while he was passed out. With

no weapon, he tries to get to his feet to make a run for it, but the Jackals are upon him.

This time they take a trick out of Rookie's book and they tackle him rugby style, the force of their two bodies is enough to cause Rook to slide down the street by a few feet before they come to a halt. The two aliens squawk in Rookie's face and he responds by punching one in between its eyes. It has skin like a human, but it feels tough, almost like metal and Rook could feel something wet slimming down his knuckles, whether it's his own blood or the alien's he doesn't have the time to look.

The Jackal that is virtually on top of him is staring to gain leverage as it presses down Rookie's body, and lashes out with its wicked claws. Rook's face would have been torn to shreds, but luckily the faceplate saves him, it screeches loudly as the talon sweeps down in a deadly arc, leaving behind a white line, but Rook is still alive, thankfully.

Rook tries to push the alien off, but it is in vain, it has a firm hold on the human and is refusing to let go. It knocks Rook's hand to the side and his hand fell on something resting on the pavement. Almost as if it's instinct, Rook forces his body to go up an inch and swings the object on his hand. The large chunky remains from a building is clutched in the Trooper's hand as it slams against the Jackal's face; causing a violent explosion as purple blood is extracted from the side of its face. It lands with a solid thump next to Rook, who turns and sees its orange beady eye staring back him, but not seeing, not with a mixture of blood and brain fragments flowing down from the gaping hole in its skull.

Rook twists his head back around when he hears the angry cry. The Jackal he had knocked aside earlier is back on its feet, staring down at the ODS. It takes something from its belt, something that looks like a long and oddly shaped dagger. It hoists the blade up high as it charges at Rook who could only watch in horror when a loud crack is sounded.

A mere millisecond after the sound was made, the alien's head jerks to the side before crumpling a foot away from where Rookie is lying. The Trooper traces the origin of the noise and looks to see Wolfgang, still inside his pod, looking stunned, with his pistol still out and smoke drifting from the barrel.

Before he could even catch his breath, Rookie hears the unmistakable sound of a fight still in motion, originating from the other side of Wolfgang's SOEIV.

He jumps to his feet and races to the massive insertion vehicle, practically jumps on top of it, gains his balance and looks on at the scene before him.

Skov is alive, but not for much longer. He has been pinned and the Jackals are attempting to pull him apart. They already torn off some of his armor and Rook is sure he saw brief crimson as the alien pulls and yanks at the screaming man, unable to wave his arms or kick out with his feet.

Knowing he didn't have much time he reaches down to Wolfgang who seems to be petrified as he sits in his pod.



"Pistol," Rook orders as he holds out his hand.

Wolfgang only gives his Lieutenant an odd look.

"Now!"

That did it. Wolfgang quickly surrenders his weapon to Rook's waiting hand and holds it up in front of, sighting down range. With his HUD uplink, he aims carefully, centers the blue crosshairs on one of the Jackals and pulls the trigger. It squeals as it wheels back from being shot in the shoulder, it turns to face Rookie and that's when he pulls the trigger three more times, burying each slug into the alien's chest.

The alien drops to the floor, but the other one is already on the move. It leaps forward with its odd legs, burning away the ten feet distance between it and Rookie. He centers the pistol and fires, but the Jackal is too quick, it veers right, causing the round to clip its hoof, but that doesn't seem to bother the savage creature at all.

Rook locks his eyes on the thing's chest and squeezes the trigger. There is a loud clang and Rook curses as the gun jams on him.

He has no time to clear the breach; the alien is right on top of him as it leaps one last time.

Hoping the kid will understand and get the message, Rookie throws himself backwards and falls back to the street as he yells, "Riter! Knife!"

The Jackal then hops out of nowhere and perches on the side of the pod. It glares down at Rookie and releases a hiss, exactly what Rook hoped for, it was too focus on killing him that the Jackal completely forgotten about Wolfgang.

The alien's hisses one last time before its eyes become wide and it stiffens. Its beak opens wide but no caw escapes. Instead it tilts forward and soundlessly drops like a sack to the floor, landing right next to Rookie.

The Lieutenant looks up and sees Wolfgang, standing up, with a purple blood covered K-bar knife in his hand.

Rook disregards the shell shock Corporal for a moment as he rushes behind the SOEIV and heads in to check on Rohit. The Raider is breathing, but isn't looking too well at the moment. His chest, leg, and part of his right arm plating have been, more or less, reduced to twisted shard remains. His helmet bores multiple scratches as well as the rest of his body. His chest is spewing a steady stream of blood as it pulses outwards.

Rook kneels by the Trooper's side and places both his hands on Rohit's wound. The Raider flinches and Rook wonders if he had accidentally hurt him.

"Who's there?" Rohit asks in a weak voice.

Realizing that the multiple scratches is preventing him from seeing

out of his helmet, Rook tries to speak in a soothing voice.

"It's alright Skov, you're safe," \_more or less\_, Rook thought to himself, "Riter, is there still an emergency med-kit in your SOEIV?"

When he receives no answer, Rook glances up and sees Wolfgang, out of his pod and standing over the Jackal he had shot, the one he had killed.

\_There's really no time for this\_.

"Riter!" Rook shouts, shocking the young trooper out of his deep thoughts, "get me the med kit from your SOEVI, now."

Wolfgang swallows but nods nonetheless. He races back to his pod, digs in it for a moment, before getting back up and rushes to Rookie's side. He hands him a small box with a red cross on it, Rook accepts it without hesitation as he opens it and starts taking out bandages and other necessities.

He starts to apply them, causing Skov to moan a bit, but Rookie ignores him.

"Where did you come from?" Rook asks Wolfgang as he works.

Wolfgang looks away from the injured man as he looks to the pod and back to his platoon leader, "I got stuck in the side of the building andâ€¦Iâ€¦I couldn't get out." He becomes quiet for a moment before saying, "I guess I was rocking the pod a bit and it fell andâ€¦"

Rook nods his head, letting the kid know he doesn't need to continue with his story. He shouldn't be too surprised, he got himself caught in couple of buildings himself during a drop. Of course last time he just jumped which was stupid now that he thinks about it. He looks up and takes in the skyscrapers above them, it seems that Wolfgang was smart enough and tried not to jump out as Rook had done. But still, if it wasn't for the "rocking," as Wolfgang had put it, then would he have not stayed up there? Was Wolfgang trying to stay out of the fighting?

There's no time to question that now. Whether he likes it or not, he's here, and he'll have to fight if he wishes to survive.

Rook wraps up the last bit of the wounded Skov before leaning back to survey his handy work. So far so good in his opinion, the bandages should last him, but not for long if he should get into another fight like they just did.

It is then that Rookie stands and takes in his surroundings. It looks the same as it did before if Rook had to be honest, grey skies, crumbling buildings, a hint of depression in the air, but there is a difference however, one that he can smell.

"The river," he mutters to himself before looking back up at his Troopers, "the river isn't far from here, can't you smell it?"

They are silent until Skov says, "I can hear it too."

Wolfgang nods as well as he identifies the indication of a body of water not too far from them.

"We need to get to the river, get our bearings, and work our way to Outpost Phoenix from there," Rookie tells them, "clear?"

They are silent before Skov raises his hand, "no disrespect sir," the injured Marines states, "but last time we tried that it didn't turn out so cool."

Rook shrugs, even if Skov can't see it, "Well we've got to try Skov, its either that or try and survive out here on our own, which I believe will be the wrong and most destructive decision for us to make."

Wolfgang goes white while Skov mulls this over, but they really had no choice in the matter. Rookie is their leader, they have to follow him, plus, he had made some good and valuable points.

Seeing that he has won, Rookie walks behind Wolfgang's pod and retrieves the Jackal's Needler gun. He stares at the odd object for a while before flicking it once and a full set of deadly needles reappears on its back like a porcupine going on the offense. Rook nods in acceptance as he stands and walks back; cradling the weapon with both hands like it's a long and heavy weapon.

Wolfgang has retrieved his fallen pistol and is clearing the jam while Skov removes his helmet, his face undamaged, as he assesses his body.

"Get geared up boys," Rookie orders as he picks up Wolfgang's helmet and tosses it to him, "We're moving out."

## 7. The Journey

### \*\*The Journey\*\*

Rookie slowly peers around the corner of the building and just as carefully brings up the strange knife he had taken from the dead Jackal guard.

He waits patiently before a Grunt comes waddling around the corner. Rook feels a small fragment of guilt creep over him when he hears the creature humming what sounds like a happy tune, however that emotion is only felt for a moment before Rook acts.

He steps into the street, the Grunt turns, its crimson eyes widen, it probably tried to open its hidden mouth to scream, but Rookie has already grabs it by its triangular shaped backpack, pulls it over and buries the knife into the alien's cranium. It squirms while its wide eyes watches Rookie as he yanks the small creature into the alley the Trooper is hidden in and hangs onto the struggling alien with a strong grip. Eventually the writhes cease and the small wheeze of the Grunt's breathing fades away, leaving the body motionless.

Rookie hangs on for a few more moments before lowering the Grunt onto the ground and unclips the plasma pistol resting in its holster. He leans back out, looking up and down the road, but sees no sign of a search party for the alien he has just taken down.

It is then he sighs and looks down at the pistol in his hand. From experience, he knows it's a pitiful weapon, it's not really powerful and doesn't have a long range, but it's better than a knife at the moment.

He glances over his shoulder before whispering, "Clear."

Steeping out of the shadow of the building they are near, comes Wolfgang as he supports Skov who is limping and is missing a large quantity of armor plating. Wolfgang still appears to be in a kind of shock, which is why he allowed Skov to hold the Covenant's crystal pistol as he hobbles around with his left arm wrapped around Wolfgang's skinny neck. As far as Rookie can tell, Skov has just suffered from severe scratching, nothing too serious, but it's obvious the wounds are ailing him. Wolfgang though has developed a sort of nervous twitch and Rook is willing to bet that if he removes his helmet, the young Marine's eyes will still be round with fright. He just hopes the kid will snap out of it soon and this new nature of his won't throw off his aim with his pistol.

The two Marines regroup with Rookie, with him standing guard at the mouth of the alley way, Skov leaning against the wall in the middle and Wolfgang watching their rear flank.

Cautiously, Rookie steps into the open and looks up and down the street. It appears deserted, but he doesn't wish to chance it, especially if there are snipers lurking in the area. He lowers himself to the floor and crawls into the street, trying his best to stay behind whatever cover he could find, rubble, vehicles and occasionally the body of a Covenant trooper. Rook finds it strange how the aliens will gather the bodies of human civilians but not their own, probably because they wish to eat the flesh of an "alien" rather than their own species. He shivers at the thought and just presses onward. Finally he reaches the other side of the road, but instead of another row of structures he finds a large grotto where there was once a mighty river.

Constant glassing activity in the north and the destruction of the southern cities have blocked and slowed the Grand Rapids River until now nothing but a trickle is barely getting by. Rook is sure he sees the occasional body floating among the other garbage and looks away as his eyes racks the land across from him.

That side of the city looks just as horrid and as beaten as Rook's side, he couldn't tell which is in worse condition or if they are both in the same weathered state.

He then turns his eyes right before looking left. From the briefing he learns that there are almost a dozen bridges connecting the two sides, but from his position he can see that they all appear to be severed. In the distance he can see the final glow of the sun as it descends, casting an orange hue to cross the skies and causes the bloodied and smoke filled lands to stand out before him. Rookie wonders when this carnage will end, if it could ever end.

He breathes deeply. "Focus," he mutters to himself before rising his head slightly over the cover of some rubble and scans his area. After one sweep he sees what he is looking for, the dark window frame of Outpost Phoenix, the giant smoking hole in its middle doesn't look

the least bit safe, but at least-

A sudden whiz passes by Rook's head and he barely hears the side of his helmet sizzle while his eyes catches the remnants of a green plasma round passing by. He instantly ducks back down and crawls away, angling back to where he left his small fireteam. Time doesn't seem to hold a factor to him, it appears as if only a few seconds have pass before he is back in the side street and Skov pats his shoulder in a welcoming way.

"Man LT," Skov says, "thought that snipe got you."

Rookie presses his finger to the side of his helmet where it is still warm from the plasma blast.

"Barley," Rookie answers, "but you have to admit, that was one heck of a shot."

Wolfgang moans silently to himself before Rook turns to him and orders, "Buck up Marine," to which Wolfgang stands straight, "it's going to take more than a parrot with a peashooter to kill us, right?"

Wolfgang nods, but Rookie can tell he isn't all that reassured. Hopefully he has enough motivation to crawl towards the outpost, but he wonders how this sniper is going to change things, more than that, can they even survive the trip?

There's no time to find another passage around, night time battles are worse than day time combat encounters, they need to find shelter soon, and hopefully they can find the rest of their platoon at the Outpost.

"Skov, think you can crawl low?" Rookie asks.

Skov snorts, "You can't become a prom king if you don't know how to go low."

Rookie shakes his head before looking to Wolfgang, "Move fast, but carefully, try not to expose too much of yourself, especially here, that sniper is good."

The young Raider is quiet before nodding his head to his CO.

Silently, Rookie makes his way back to the street and leans out a bit. There are skyscrapers lined up along the road, the sniper could be anywhere. He looks back down the street leading to Outpost Phoenix, his eyes looking for a means of travel before his gaze finally settle on a crevice that has been split open in the middle of the road. It'll be tight squeeze and all that will be keeping the ODSs from plunging into the sewers is a pipe that is resting just below the concrete of the street. The crevice stretches for almost a mile, offering perfect cover while the Troopers are moving.

The Lieutenant looks back to his men and says, "OP Phoenix is a couple of blocks away, if we get separated, regroup there, follow my lead, don't stop, don't think and try not to kill anything until we are behind a solid wall, clear?"

The two Drop Shock Troopers nod in agreement. Rookie looks back out, scans the rooftops and windows again in a hopeless search for the elusive sniper before sighing again. He gets low into a crouch, looks over his shoulder to see the two Marines hooking their weapons to their belts while Rookies does the same. Skov stumbles a little, but he stoops down in preparation to run. Despite being wounded, Skov appears more combat ready than the still quivering Wolfgang does.

Rook looks to the road, breathes and rushes into the open.

He ducks low, zigs between two furniture pieces before diving behind a cement slab that is protruding from the ground. He shifts his body until he is sure his body mass is completely behind cover; for the most part. He peeks back out and glances at the alley way just as Skov come storming out.

Copying Rook's exact movements, he makes his way to Rookie's position, which is a stretch of almost five yards. Not a large scale of land, but all that a sniper needs is a exposed target for two seconds to pull the trigger and let the plasma fly. Finally Skov slides down, but his ailment causing him to crash into what appears to be a book case before he hurriedly moves behind it and stays on his hands and knees. The two Marines than look back to watch the most nervous of the trio to come forward next.

Even from five yards away, Rook can plainly see Wolfgang knees starting to buckle. He keeps looking out into the street before retreating back into the shadows, wait for what feels like a whole minute before sticking his head out again.

Rookie allows this process to continue for a while before he shouts out, "Soring's going to strike by the time you make up your mind Wolfgang."

The young Trooper freezes at the sound of the LT's voice. He sucks in a noisy breath before springing into the open. Unlike the first two Raiders though, he doesn't swerve, he runs in a straight line, trying to make it to cover as fast as he could. He places one hand on his helmet like he is afraid it's going to blow off, but by that time he reaches where the other Troopers are.

A green flash suddenly hits the back of Wolfgang's helmet, disappears for a half a second before exiting out the faceplate in the front. Rookie watches in horror as the young Marine falls to the ground with his arms and legs spread out.

"Skov, cover!" Rook orders but he is already moving. He rushes into the open, grabs Wolfgang by the armor plating and drags him behind the slab he was hiding behind earlier. Skov has his crystal pistol out, but with no visible targets in sight he doesn't fire.

Rookie knows it's probably a lost cause, but he tears the helmet off Wolfgang's head and just about had a heart attack.

Wolfgang is staring back, eyes wide and full of terror, but also filled with life. Skov comes closer and stares down at the supposedly dead Raider, no doubt with a surprised expression behind his helmet that mirror's Rook's own disbelief.

Rookie picks up the disregarded helmet and looks at it thoroughly. The plasma round had entered through the upper right corner and exit out the same way via faceplate. Wolfgang's head has been clip slightly, singeing his short hair and some skin, but other than that he wasn't injured.

Rookie releases a massive burst of air before grabbing the shell shock Marine by the shoulder and shakes him while saying, "Never do that again Wolfgang, you hear me?"

Mutely, Wolfgang nods as he touches the side of his head with a still shaking hand before sitting back up and Rook hands him his helmet.

Rookie huffs before glancing at Skov and asks, "Well?"

Skov shakes his head, "Sniper is hidden good, can't even tell what angle he shot at, only that he might be close to ground levelâ€¦maybe."

Rook quickly leans out to search the area where he thought he saw the energy burst came from, but there are too many buildings with too many windows. This is a sniper's dream haven and this enemy combatant is using it to his full advantage. With no possible way of telling where this person is hiding, Rookie decides the best thing to do is to get out of the area before a Covenant patrol hears the shots and advance onto them.

He turns back to his two men and said, "Follow me," he looks at Wolfgang, "exactly like me." The young Raider nods yet again, Rook is starting to wonder if there is something wrong with his vocal chords. He clears his mind of that thought when he gets down on his belly and begins crawling through the rubble. He hears some shifting around and knows that his small team is following.

Occasionally he pushes aside the garbage and the wreckage that blocks his way, all the while trying to stay as low to the floor as possible. A sudden whiz and a plopping sound remind him that the sniper is still around and is still a threat. He tries not to focus on that as he reaches the small crevice. He carefully insets himself in, his armor screeching in protest as he fits himself into the hole. He gags slightly as some of the soiled manure from beneath him files upwards and passes by his helmet's air filters. He lays his full weight on the pipe that is about as wide as his body, it holds without much trouble. Rook sighs in relief before bringing his arms up until they are almost in front and he starts to pull himself forward with his elbows, centimeter by centimeter.

He has gotten a meter away when he feels the pipe shudder and he pauses. Barely raising his head, Rookie looks back to Skov, whose helmet faceplate hides his no doubt weary face. They are both still until the pipe finally settles. Cluthing his fists in frustration, Rookie carefully raises himself up a little, keeping his full weight off the pipeline before continuing on his unbelievable journey.

He goes another few feet before the massive underground duct shakes once more, but this time a bolt gives and Rook slides forward slightly before the pipe becomes stable again. He looks over his shoulder and sees Wolfgang who is using all of his strength not to put his whole weight on the pipe, the strain obvious by his stiff

limbs.

This might have been a bad idea, Rook thinks to himself, but with them out in an open street and a sniper hovering over them he knew they couldn't get back up, besides, the pipe could collapse if any of them stands on it. With no other choice, the three Troopers carry on.

As they move they would occasionally bounce, tense and curse as tremors and their movement causes the tubing to jerk around every so often. The sewage flowing beneath them didn't help much, nor did the occasional shots that the crack sniper would send over their heads. Almost ten minutes have passed since they had arrive onto the scene, but it feels like an eternity is passing the Raiders by as they make their way forward until they stop when they hear a roar.

Wolfgang frowns in puzzlement, but Skov and Rookie are almost overtaken in pure horror. Every Covenant war veteran knows that sound, it's different from any other being that have ever been faced on the field of battle, a creature that is feared more than the Brutes. It is the war cry of a Hunter. And it sounded close.

Now Rookie knows they are in trouble. Despite their massive bodies, Hunters are actually a collection of a large number of eel like creatures who are intelligent enough to come together and use a gun. But not a normal plasma gun, a plasma cannon that has been attached along with their armor plating, making them a seven foot six inches tall slaughtering machine that can only be killed with either a lucky shot or a anti-tank weapon.

Skov raises himself slightly and says, "LT, what's the plan?"

Rookie is silent before replying, "Nothing, we don't even know if it's coming this way."

However an ear piercing screech interrupts him and a moment late, a car is thrown out of a nearby street and crashes not far from them. The pipe shifts greatly, causing the three men to grit their teeth as they softly brace themselves. Another roar followed by the stomping of a pair of powerful feet.

"What is that!?" asks a terrified Wolfgang as he shouts from his rear position.

"You don't want to know kid!" shouts back Rookie in answer, but that wasn't necessary. A mere second later, two black armored titans steps around the corner and turns their attention onto the three Troopers in the hole.

They appear to stare at them with their eyeless faces before one of the beasts roars a challenge and they both level their cannons, aiming at the Marines.

"Hug the pipe!" Rookie shouts.

"What!?" questions Skov.

"Do it!" Rookie orders as he grabs hold of the tube, causing it shake with his movements. Meanwhile the Hunter's cannons charge in preparation to release their turret of plasma power onto them.



Realizing what he is doing and that they really have no chance of avoiding the deadly blaze that will befall them, the other Troopers put their full weight on the pipe, causing it wobble and whine as the bolts unhook and the metal is strained.

The Hunter's release their green liquid fire that flies through the air, aimed at the three Marines.

"This is stu-!" Skov is interrupted when the pipe finally snaps and a moment later, they are falling down the underground cavern and lands with a splash.

Wolfgang makes a sound of disgust as he stands in knee high sewage before shivering when he sees the crimson liquid that is mixed in with the floating waste. A quake causes the Troopers to fall back into the muck as the green projectiles hit the side of the hole where they were crawling a moment later, raining dust and rock upon them.

"Get up and run!" Orders Rookie as he helps Skov up puts his arm around his neck and helps the injured Marine along while Wolfgang runs behind them.

In the distance, Rookie hears the alien's calls of frustration. Perhaps traveling through the dark smelly sewers is better than the streets, he thought to himself.

\* \* \*

><p>"What is this?" Rila questions as she reaches into the skies and clasps one of the strange objects.<p>

She brings it close to her chest and opens her fist, but only to find the white thing gone, yet it somehow left behind a wet spot on her palm.

"It's called snow," Anya says as she watches her companion who is standing next to a window, observing the white particles as they fall to Earth. "Usually, these lands would be covered in the stuff, but I guess all the space battles in the sky melted the moisture in the clouds or something."

She walks up next to the Sangheili and looks to the heavens, "It isn't until something is gone do you realize how much you appreciated it."

Rila glances at her female comrade, but her face is hidden by her helmet. She instead returns her gaze out the window as she watches the tiny fluffs float down, but after a unit the small flow ends, leaving no trace that the "snow" even existed.

"What purpose does it serve?" she asks.

Anya shrugs, "I don't knowâ€|has something to do with lighting the water load in the air or something like that, I didn't really study much about Earth's climate you know."

"Why not?"

"I'm from Mars," seeing Rila peering at her questioningly she

elaborates, "it's a planet not far from Earth, but its relatively dry and hardly has any clouds."

"Ah," is all that Rila could think of before glancing out the window again, but this time she is staring at the city before them.

It is really unlike anything she has seen before. On Sanghelios, the cities were built on different elevations of land, with official and important buildings on top while the lower merchant class lies on the ground. There are no tall buildings though, the only structures that touches the skies are old Forerunner artifacts and the large Keeps that safeguard the individual fiefdoms. Truth be told, the cities were no more than a gathering for the Sangheili people and the selling of wares and goods. The same appears to be the same here, but the humans apparently shows their pride in their skills by trying to make their structures shine and living within them.

Pride filled buildings; it isn't until now does Rila realize how far her people have fallen. They have been lied to and tricked for centuries by the Prophets who manipulated them and left them with a weaken civilization structure, a fracture that the Sangheilis haven't realized until they seceded from the Covenant. They have no builders, no engineers, no painters and no scientists. The only ones who have experienced in work are the merchants, some of who makes their own products, but that doesn't make them geniuses. Now with Rila facing one of the human's metropolises she soon feels very small and slightly inferior. And they were once the ones calling the humans ignorant and substandard.

She sighs as she rubs her eyes out of shame and irritation. The fact that she keep failing in her guarding duties isn't helping the Sangheili reputation either. The cycle is close to being completed and still they have received no word about Rookie. A few more Troopers have made their way to the Outpost, but their leader isn't among them. She isn't supposed to let him out of her sight, and now the worst of situations have befallen her. She has lost her charge and doesn't even know if he is dead or not while in the middle of a large battle. They had tried contacting him, but there is something wrong with the human's devices, she doesn't understand it all, but from what she understands they use their ship to help communicate between their combat squads. Which means the giant space cruiser that they have seen fall to the ground was their ship, which now deprive them of much needed supplies.

This is all bad, very bad. If Rookie died than Rila, along with her entire Keep, will be shamed and will be unable to revive their old status, especially since it was the Arbiter himself who bestowed a guard into Rookie in the first place. To fail her charge would in turn be failing the Arbiter, staining his reputation and tarnishing all the achievements he had recovered after the war with the Covenant.

However there is more to it than just honor and dignity. The thought that Rookie is dead places a cold feeling in Rila, one that is hard to shake and even harder to understand. It's almost like she dreads that he is gone, the same way that she fears if one of her family members have passed. She wonders if this means she sees Rookie as a sort of brother, but something is telling her that it is more than that.

She wonders if it's possible that she had actually developed feeling for him, he is the first male in a very long time to make her feel comfortable and the way he makes her feel happy just by touching her skin is almost unparalleled compared to the other males who had courted her earlier in life.

However she becomes sadden when she remembers that they are of different species. Worse, he had admitted to her that he lost everything he loved because of the Covenant, because of her people. He probably feels pain when he sees her. Besides, even if this was possible, she knew she isn't worthy to be pursued by such a strong and capable warrior like this human; he deserves to be with a powerful Keep mistress or maybe even a priestess, women of high statues who could no doubt fill Rookie's life with joy.

She wonders if he doesn't tell her his name simply because he doesn't trust her, but that can't be it, he doesn't tell anyone else his name either. Not even his Keep name, leaving her to ponder on whom this human is and if he has any friends at all.

"Hey!" the two females turn at the sound of the male's voice. A Trooper stands in the doorway as he says, "Sergeant Wiley wants us assembled at the front now," he turns and walks off without checking to see if the two women would follow.

"Guess that means Scott finally has a plan," Anya says as readjusts her rifle strap before hurrying after the Raider, leaving Rila to follow from behind.

They enter the main room of the large structure, the lobby as everyone calls it. The other troopers are milling around, staring outside, sitting down or cleaning their weapons. There are a few soldiers in the room as well, but they are sucking on the burning sticks, eating, or just gazing at the walls. She notes that only a few of them are standing and had weapons in their hands or slung on their backs, ready to fight at a moment's notice. On some of their helmets is an emblem of a large animal head with large tusks while the barrels of twin weapons are positioned on its back. She was told that these soldiers are Tankers and that they control the human's armor attack vehicles. She remembers what Sergeant Long had said, about how they are better than the other soldiers stationed here. Their looks alone prove that point.

She returns her attention back to the Troopers who are positioned around the holographic machine, with Scott in the middle. Shuffling as close as they could, the humans got close to their commander, but not too close. Rila stands in the back with Anya next to her. She scans the faces of the Marines and sighs. Still no sign of Rookie, Wolfgang, or Matthew. She wonders if they are alright, the thought of them being dead is rather disturbing to her, even though they have only met recently.

"All right boys and girls, listen up" Scott suddenly thunders as he looks at all the Troopers assembled before him. After a moment he continues, "defenses are sucky at best and are certainly aren't worth much, but they are better than nothing."

He then puts on his helmet, taps in a few commands on the side of his HUD and the hologram machine suddenly disappears before being replaced with a new one. This image shows a large number of cubes

that are baffling in Rila's opinion until she realizes it's a map.

"Here is where we are," Scott says as the central square turns bright blue, "this is where the primary defenses are" three other builders are brighten as well, none of them at good defendable positions in Rila's opinion, "and this is where the Covenant are."

Rila feels herself stiffen and somebody within the crowd moans. The entire area outside of the small space between the four buildings have turn bright red, large blobs that are slowly moving around them in a odd and most dangerous formation.

"As you can guess, we are pretty much surrounded," Scott says as he observes the small map as well, "and with the net down there is no way to contact Regiment."

Rila lowers her head until it about level with Anya's ear and asks, "But I thought theâ€|Lieutenant," Rila stumbles over the word, "said he was making a call to thisâ€|Regiment."

Anya sighs before saying bluntly, "guess he lied."

Why would a leader lie? Shouldn't they be honest with their soldiers, especially in a dire situation like this?

"So what now Scott?" an ODST further up in the crowd asks.

"We dig in, fortify and join the soldiers as they mount guerrilla warfare," Scott says, disgust clear in his voice.

"That's not going to get us far Sarge," a new voice that Rila recognizes as Azim says.

Scott sighs before shrugging, "We have little to no supplies, we out numbered and we have no support, the Shanghai was our main source for that, so as you can see we're pretty much on our own until the Sangheilis get here."

"When?" pipes up another voice.

"We still don't know."

Rila keeps her head low in embarrassment and slight shame at how slow her people seem to be mobilizing their battle group. And why should they? As she grew, she, as well as every other young Sangheili, was told that humans were insignificant creatures and that relations between them should be kept to a minimum. But now she is friends with the humans and she is here with them on a battlefield. If she ever returns home to Sacred Sanghelios she will have a talk with the elders and wish to bring this case before the council. But that's if she even survives to get out of here.

"Sir is Stranks in charge?" a new voice speaks up.

"Not at the moment," Scott answers as he glances at his wrist, "sleep rotations, every person in the squad gets four hours of rest while somebody stands watch before switching off, clear?"

Anya speaks up, "what if your squad isn't here?"

Rila hears the slight twinge in her companion's voice and realize she is feeling loss over the absence and possible deaths of her comrades Matthew and Wolfgang. Feeling the same pain, she places a clawed hand on the young woman's shoulder and gives a light squeeze in an attempt to reassure her. Anya responds by patting her hand with affection.

She isn't sure if Scott had seen the action, but he says, "get with a buddy then," he looks at the rest of the Troopers, "all of you, if your full squad isn't present than get in another group and lock yourselves down for the night," he looks each person in the visor or eye, including Rila, before saying, "that's all Raiders."

Slowly, the Troopers disperse; some cursing, some mumbling, while others just remain silent.

Rila feels someone patting her back and looks down to see Anya looking up at her.

"Let's go find a room," Anya simply says. Before Rila could answer, she already turned and is walking away. Sensing her deep sorrow, Rila follows her, though they only re-entered the large room they were already in earlier. Other squads are within as well as they take apart chairs and remove their cushions, laying it on the floor before lying down on them. Other soldiers are either sitting or standing against the walls, weapons in hand as they watch the doors and windows.

Anya slumps against a far off wall and says, "Is it alright if you take first watch?" She folds up her knees and places her arms on them before resting her head against her limbs, "I just feel really tired at the moment."

Rila peers at her curiously as she realizes Anya is more than tired. She appears beyond exhaustion, she shudders as she wonders if she is becoming like the soldiers they have seen earlier. But why? Was it because of the absence of Wolfgang and Matthew? Is she feeling the same emotions that Rila is feeling and grieving for her lost comrades?

All that she can do is gently lower herself to the floor and pat Anya's shoulder.

"Of course my friend," she says, "rest."

She hears Anya give one last sigh before becoming silent.

Rila releases her own huff of air before standing back up and peeking out the widow closest to them. The streets are dark now and looking as dangerous as ever. She hopes for the hundredth time that her new human allies are alive.

\* \* \*

><p>"This sucks."<p>

"Well suck it right up Corporal" snaps back Skov, "and stop whining, this is better than getting shot at every few seconds."

Wolfgang gives a small sound of disgust, "Aw man, I think something just went into my boot."

"Quiet," Rookie orders from the corner of his mouth as he pauses to evaluate their route. The long sewage tunnel they are in reeks to the point that it looks like the filters in their helmets have stopped working. The sewage is barely moving as they wade across the oncoming current, the waste covers their feet, but every so often a small wave comes along and engulfs their legs, reaching all the way up to their calves. The dark interior is intimidating, but thanks to the HUD's enhanced vision setting they are able to see into the shadows, up to a certain point that is.

The small squad comes to a halt as they reach a T section. The path in front is just as dark as the path to the left, both looking the same in length, diameter and appearance as the green night vision HUDs illuminate the inner gutter of the city.

"Which way now boss?" asks Skov as he puts his full weight on Wolfgang, causing him to grunt as he tries to support the heavier Trooper's weight.

Rookie is silent for a few more moments before saying, "Well we must have covered a couple of blocks by now," he gestured to their current path, "if we go down this way we might bypass our target."

He then motions to the left, "or we could go this way, it might get us closer to OP Phoenix, but then again I'm not even sure if we are near the objective."

The small team is silent for a few moments before a sound is heard in the distant, a plop sound like someone has just dropped a rock in the water.

"What was that?" asks Wolfgang as he visibly starts to shake again.

Skov snickers, "Could be a another Brute slowly making its way towards us," Wolfgang shakes even harder, "or it could be a Jackal assassin," Wolfgang looks ready to bolt, "or it could just be a Grunt taking a dump."

Wolfgang stops trembling and looks at Skov, no doubt scowling behind his faceplate.

"S-stop that," the young Raider demands, but Skov merely snickers.

They finally stop their antics when they hear it again. Only this time there is more of them, like a small rainfall has just started. Echoing throughout the passageway is the splashing of hundreds of object as it is dump into the liquid before it finally stops.

The Marines remain absolutely motionless as they wait to see what is to come next.

"What is that?" Skov asks.

"Oh stop already," Wolfgang says in his young voice, "I'm already as scared as can be."

"No he's right," Rookie cuts in, "there's something else."

Slowly their ears begin to pick up the multiple sounds of a pitter patter like sensation. The muck beneath them slowly starts to churn and become uneven as a mini-tremor hits.

"What's going on?" asks a deeply concern Wolfgang as he steps back, forcing Skov to hop along as well.

"Rats," Rookie answers.

"What?"

Before their Lieutenant could elaborate, they hear over a million of squeaks and at that moment, something small and brown swam between their legs, going like a high power motor boat. The group stares until it disappears and that's when they notice that they are surrounded. The tiny creatures swims at unbelievable speed as they bustle thorough the waters in a mad dash, all pushing and nipping at each other as they try to overbear each other. The constant pushing and shoving is strong enough to cause the humans to stumble as they try to get a stable footing in the moving sea of creatures. A full minute passes before the mass movement of rodents came to an end and everything is settled.

Skov stares off after the rats before saying, "Well I guess they're just as desperate as everyone else to get out of this place."

"No," Rookie says grimly as he looks back into the darkness before them, "they are running away from something."

As if to confirm what he has just said, something just comes floating out of the darken cavern.

The two Troopers let loose a stream of curses while Rookie glances down and stares as a human arm floats passes him. A few moments later, more body parts starts to come along, some of which are so fresh that the flesh still looks warm and dark blood starts pooling out from them.

"I don't like where this is going," mutters Skov as he watches a piece of a person's face with its eyeball still intact drifts by.

Then they hear it, a sound familiar to Rookie while also terrifying; the deep buzzing of insects.

"Bees?" asks a confused Wolfgang.

"No," mutters Rookie before the shapes appear. Tiny bodies flying through the air on large wings, twig like arms, huge eyes and flags open in the rear as they hover along, bright colored weapons held in their clawed digits.

"Drones!"

The decision is made for them, without a word, the Troopers turns left and starts sprinting. Rookie falls back a bit, lowers himself to the ground and comes up behind Skov. He pushes his shoulders between

the injured Raider's legs before standing up, with Skov on his back. Rookie grunts under the pain before pushing himself forward while Wolfgang follows close behind.

The low buzz of the alien insects transforms into a boom as they chase after the humans. Rookie would glance over his shoulder, but every time that he does it always looks like more and more Drones have joined the fray. He counted five, then twelve, nineteen and finally twenty four.

"There must be some sort of a hive down here!" shouts Skov over the roar of the Drone's wings.

"Doesn't matter," yells Rookie, "Wolfgang shoot! Use the pistol's short controlled shots!"

The Trooper nods before looking behind him, raises his pistol over his shoulder and starts firing. However despite Wolfgang being a rifle man, his aim is off as the slugs miss most of their targets. Some ricochets and skids across the walls and the few bullets that did find a target only embed themselves within the alien's hide, not appearing to even slowing down. When Wolfgang finally shot a Drone in the head, killing it instantly, it took him almost a dozen tries just to get one and it looks like more are still coming.

By this time Rookie is starting to slow down and he is soon gasping for air.

"Hurry!" urges Skov as he watches in horror as the insects close in.

Easy for him to say, Rookie thought darkly to himself before he notices something. In front of them, off to the right side is a ray of light. It's a ladder leading up to an open man hole. Rookie isn't sure if they are still within the sights of the sniper or even if they are close to OP Phoenix, but he knew they just might have a chance if they take this fight to the open.

He hustles over to the ladder and not so gently throws Skov off and having him lean against the ladder.

"Start climbing!" Rookie shouts as he takes out the plasma pistol and knife.

Skov looks at Rookie, Wolfgang and finally the wall of insects that are no more than a hundred yards away.

"But-" he tries to say.

"Now!" screams Rookie before turning and bringing up the pistol. He knew chances of him and Wolfgang taking down an entire swarm of insects isn't possible, but the least they could do is cover Skov until he makes it out. He hears the grunting sound as Skov hauls himself up, the only indication Rookie needed before he starts blasting.

Pulling the trigger in a rapid sequence, he releases a small turret of green plasma as he tries to go for head shots. However the plasma pistol isn't the best of weapons and that is proven when the bolts of energy hits the Drones but they merely shake it off.



The plasma makes a sizzling sound as it releases its energy while Wolfgang's pistol emits loud booms as he now holds the weapon with both hands as he tries to steady his aim. However within a minute that doesn't matter. The insects suddenly spread themselves apart, hovering in place but not quitting their jittery movements and open fires.

A flaming and heavy turret of energy is unleashed upon the two Marines as they try to find cover behind whatever they could. Rookie dive to the concrete square place beneath the manhole while Wolfgang just drops and goes underneath the messy waters he was standing in a few moments ago. Rookie tries to get off a few more shots, but it's drowned out as he covers his head while a thunderous cloud of purple needles and green plasma flies all around him and eats their way through the metal and cement material around the Trooper.

With little options and hoping Wolfgang will be safe, Rookie takes out a grenade, pulls the pin but holds it and feels the vibration the small explosive device creates as it "cooks". A few seconds later, he hurls the device at the middle of the swarm. Another moment later, the grenade explodes while in mid-arc, swallowing the surrounding insects in flames and peppering those around the inferno with shrapnel. Incinerated Drones and insects whose wings have been clipped by the scorching metal falls to the water, but that is not enough, in fact, they don't even appear to have noticed the horrid death of their fellow brethren.

Rookie risks a quick glance up and just sees Skov push his way through the hole and is now on the surface.

Rook then shouts, "Wolfgang let's go!"

At first there is nothing before a flailing body shoots upwards and lands on the slab that Rookie is on. The Raider is hit by enemy fire, but the armor seems to be holding, at least for a while.

"Climb Wolfgang, climb!" orders the Lieutenant as he primes two grenades in preparation of throwing.

Wolfgang doesn't get a second to breathe as he flings himself onto the ladder and starts climbing up. The fire intensifies before Rookie stands and throws the grenades. They fly to the largest cluster of insects and detonate within their ranks. This time the explosion is enough to shake the tunnel, causing a portion of the roof to fall and land on the Drones while disabling even more as they plop into the water.

Rook looks up and sees Wolfgang almost out, moving a lot faster than Skov considering he isn't injured. Deciding it's now or never, Rookie takes out one last grenade and activates it. The Drones keep firing as he tries to dodge the blasts, but eventually he releases a small yelp of pain as he feels a burning sensation on his ribs. Releasing an agitated curse, he flings the explosive, but this time he aims at the ceiling. He doesn't see what happens as he turns and starts climbing himself. Soon he feels blisters and burns as they appear all over his body from the blast of the enemy's weapons before he hears the blast. The whole tunnel shakes, dust and chunks of the ceiling falls, but that doesn't bother Rookie as he clambers onto the last rung and pulls himself out.

He rolls onto his back and pants as his body cools down, but his moment of rest is disturbed when he hears the beating of wings beneath him.

The rhythmic sound is cut off as he looks to the side and sees that Skov has just push a piece of scrap metal over the manhole. He then throws his body onto the flimsy material before shouting over his shoulder, "Hurry kid!"

"I'm trying!" a voice responds that Rookie identifies as Wolfgang.

Ignoring the screams of protests from his aching body, Rook forces himself into a sitting posture and looks at the young Trooper. He is a few feet away from Rookie, on one side of the skeletal remains of a car as he attempts to push it towards Skov. It barely makes any progress as it moves forward an inch at a time despite the grunts that Wolfgang is releasing.

Staggering to his feet, Rookie forces his legs to move as he stumbles towards Wolfgang, hoping he'll have enough strength to help. He grasps one side of the vehicle and pushes it while Wolfgang pushes the other. Slowly the car moves forward and Wolfgang shouts out, "Skov move!"

Without complaint, Skov roll away from the hole. The sheet of metal lifts up by an inch as a long leg sticks its way out, but it is squashed and severed from its body as the car is pushed onto the metal, holding down the physically weak Drones.

With the threat now contained, Rookie finally collapses onto the floor and rolls onto his back as he looks up at the skies above him. The stars gleams back at him as the orange light from the West slowly retreats and the humans are left in the darken streets.

Rookie than looks around and see that they are back on the city block, but this time there is no Covenant combatants in sight nor is there any sign to indicate they are in immediate danger. Wolfgang and Skov are both on the ground as they attempt to catch their breaths; he also notes that Wolfgang is twitching probably from the adrenaline that is still pulsing in his inexperienced system.

He sighs as he lowers himself back to the ground and he shuts his eyes, however they snap open when he hears the click of a round being chambered into a gun.

Standing above him is a shadow with a barrel pushed to his faceplate, so close that he couldn't see what type of weapon it is nor who it is wielding the weapon.

Judging from the gasp and curse he hears, it sounds like Wolfgang and Skov are caught in a similar position.

The person standing above him speaks in a feminine tone, "name and unit Trooper."

Seeing nothing to lose, Rookie breathes calmly before saying, "First Lieutenantâ€¦people call me Rookie, we are part of First Platoon, ODSB Raider Battalion."

The figure stiffens as if she is surprised before she pulls back the weapon and offers Rookie a hand. He would have much preferred to lie on the floor a couple more minutes, but he reaches out with his burnt hand and he is pulled onto his feet. Looking across the way he sees that Skov and Wolfgang are being pulled to their feet as well. All signs of hostility are gone.

Rookie looks back to the woman before him and started saying, "name andâ€|" he falls silent as he studies the person before him.

The woman is almost eye to eye with him, has green eyes, blond hair messily tied back and an Assault rifle in hand. But what catches his attention is that she is wearing a ripped up brown jacket, a burnt blue shirt, grime covered pants and work boots that looks like they are falling apart.

"Unit?" she asks innocently before chuckling sweetly, "my name is Chloe Izzard," she then gestures to her colleagues who are similar dressed, "and I suppose you can say our unit is called 'the resistance'."

## 8. The Reunion

**\*\*The Reunion\*\***

"What did you say your name was again?" Chloe questions.

"I didn't," Rookie responds, "just call me Rookie Ms. Izzard."

The woman laughs, "call me Chloe Trooper, everybody does."

"Right," Rook says as he pauses to look up at the impending skyscrapers, but winces. Somewhere during the fight he was shot in the upper shoulder. Though it wasn't a fatal and the armor took the brunt of the blast, the heat was still intense enough to burn his skin.

Skov is instantly by his side and asks, "You alright LT?"

Rookie couldn't help but smirk, "I'm fine Skov, watch after yourself," he looks at Wolfgang who is supporting the injured Marine, "or rather you watch after him Riter."

"I'm trying to," Wolfgang responds, "but he's moving too fast."

"Believe me kid," Skov says, "you don't want to be in Covie territory when it's nighttime."

"Amen to that," one of Chloe's men says, "especially now that they know there are lost

>Troopers to hunt for," he finishes with a glare.<p>

"Look man," Skov says, "we came here to help, I if I knew this was going to happen," he gestures to his scarred body, "I wouldn't have bothered showing up."

"Cool it J-Slash," Chloe chides, "at least we know there's a fight

still going on."

"And we're losing it apparently," the man called J-Slash retorts, hugging his weapon closer to himself.

Rook tries to take in his appearance but his head is covered by a beanie and his face is smeared in ash. His attire is the same as Chloe and the other unknown man, blue jeans, shirt, and shoes; civies clothes that have been burnt and tattered. The only thing that stands out is their individual faces and gear.

Chloe is a blonde with her hair tied up with a pretty almost angelic face that has a harden layer of crust, but she still looks nice. Her pockets are stuff full of paper, probably maps and important documents. She has two grenades on her hip and some bullet magazine stuffed into her pants, all for her outdated MK Assault rifle that she has in one hand.

The other unknown man that is following from behind is silent, but he has bright eyes that seem to glow as he scans for threats. He has a hunting rifle with a scope attach, no doubt probably design to bring down deer, not over grown ape like Brutes. His hair is brown, but one side is blacken as if it caught fire at one point and in his jacket pocket he has glass bottles with towels sticking out from the lip. Improvise explosives, Rook wonders if he almost blew himself up and if that is why one side of his head is blackened?

He returns his gaze to J-slash and asks "Is that an AK ninety five?"

The man grins as he hefts his weapon proudly, "Yes sir, bought it at an auction a year ago."

"An auction?" Skov says with disbelief, "you're fighting with an antique? Does it even work?"

J-slash throws him another dirty look, "Yeah it works, it got me this far hasn't it?"

"Those things were decommissioned because they jammed often and fires only small rounds," Rookie says, "you can't kill anything larger than a Grunt, and that's if you get close enough to use it, it's built more for close quarters combat."

J-Slash looks insulted, "Who are you to judge?" he demands, "Just because you're an ODST that does not mean you can shoot me down like that man."

"He's part of the old breed," Skov claims, "The fact that he is still standing must mean he knows more than you ever will."

"The old breed?" J-slash asks.

"Soldiers who fought and survived five years of the human-Covenant war," Chloe says with a light frown as she gives Rook a sideways glance, "my brother was one."

Rookie nods his head in respect before saying, "Listen, we need to get to the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel, do you know where it is?"

"Yeah," Chloe says as she points down an alley, "its three blocks down that way."

Rookie nods in satisfaction, "Good, let's pick up the pace before it gets darker."

The three Troopers are already moving down the indicated street when Chloe's voice stops them, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, where are you guys going?"

Rookie turns to face the confused woman and says, "We have an outpost establish there, it's full of Troopers and Soldiers, we'll be safe there."

Chloe seems startled, but before she could say anything, J-slash steps forward and says, "Yeah, that sounds absolutely brilliant."

"What is that supposed to be mean?" Skov challenges as he tries to step towards the civilian, but Wolfgang holds him back.

"No offense or anything," J-Slash continues with a sneer, "but it has been wise to avoid a mass gathering of soldiers, that's usually the place where the Covies tend to attack."

"An even better reason to head to the Outpost," Rookie counters, "we have food, water, and every one there is professionally trained to be killers, at the moment it's one of the safest places on Earth."

"Yeah right," J-Slash continues, but he is interrupted when Chloe steps in places a hand on his shoulder.

"Look," she says in a calm voice, "we've got a lot of people back at our camp, wounded, sick, elders and a whole bunch of scared kids, we've to bring them with us too if we are heading to this outpost."

"Not a chance," Skov answers.

"What!?" Chloe exclaims, but before she could so much as shoot the Trooper, Rookie steps back in.

"What he means," Rook says carefully, "is that we can't move them tonight, it's too dangerous, the best way we can get to them is via convoy, probably tomorrow-"

"You want us to move in a large group?" J-Slash says in indignation, "in broad daylight?"

"That's probably the best chance," Rookie said, analyzing the situation, "if we try moving at night someone is bound to slip up resulting with lots of people getting killed. And if things are as bad as you claim they are, then I can't imagine a bunch of sick and injured people being able to crouch and crawl through the filthy streets. Moving in a convoy with guns blazing will have to do, it's the only option other than attempting to move them through during the night, most of them probably won't make it pass the first block."

Chloe is biting her lips as she looks at the ground, causing J-Slash to shout.

"Are you actually considering-" he is cut off when Rookie slaps the back of his head. When the man turns to face the Trooper, Rookie merely places a finger in front of his faceplate before gesturing at their surroundings. It's too dangerous to argue at the moment.

Finally Chloe looks up and says, "When you put it that way it makes sense I guess."

"Then we are in agreement," Rookie says, "tomorrow we'll get your people and bring them to Outpost Phoenix."

"Wait, wait," J-Slash tries to interrupt, "how do we know is going to work? What assurance do we have?"

"My word-" Rookie tries to say before J-Slash laughs in his face, "Well that sure sounds like a lot, that's shot of a letter of guarantee from an General."

"How about this?" Skov questions as he tries to shake Wolfgang off, "he'll give you his word and I'll give you a frag grenade up your-"

"Shut it," Rookie cuts in as he looks to J-Slash, "What more do you want to do? It's the best plan we have, there's tanks, rooms full of Soldiers and Orbital Drop Shock Troopers, doesn't that make you feel better?"

J-Slash doesn't answer; instead he looks to the other man who hasn't said a word throughout the whole debate.

"Do you agree with this?" he demands.

The man remains silent before gesturing to Chloe. There is a moment of silence before she looks between her two fellow resistance fighters, "Get the people together, tell them what's going on and-"

"Where are you going?" J-Slash breaks in.

"With them," she says as she steps towards the Troopers, "They need directions and I can get them pass the traps once when we get close to camp."

"Traps?" Wolfgang wonders out loud.

"But what about Keelson and Jayvee?" J-Slash says, "They'll never follow me-"

"Don't ask them to follow you," Chloe answers, "Tell them what has happen and that they need to get the people ready to move, pack everything that they can and make sure that everyone who can fight is armed."

J-Slash looks ready to argue some more, but the second guy nudges his shoulder and simply shakes his head. He then moves to Chloe and gives

her a quick one armed hug, which she returns with sibling like affection. J-Slash just grunts something that sounds like "stupid," before he wonders off into the dark city, with the silent man bringing up the rear.

"Not that I care," Skov says as he glares after the two fighters, "but do you think they will make it?"

"I hope so," Chloe says before turning to Rookie and hardening her voice by a fraction, "and I hope what you say about the UNSC forces being there is true as well."

Rook looks her in the eye (even if she can't see his) before saying, "Trust me, now let's get going."

\* \* \*

><p>"I'm going to kill her!"<p>

"Whoa! Easy!"

"Stand down!"

It takes the combine strength of Anya, Rohit and his entire squad to hold back Rila as she attempts to charge after Azim.

"Did you hear what she called me?!" she growls at the people holding her, causing Rohit's two squad mates to step back, but not Rohit and Anya.

"Do you even know what she said?" Rohit questions.

"No, but I can tell an insult when I hear one," she snarls at him before swinging on Anya, "it was an insult was it not?"

"Wellâ€|yeah," Anya says meekly, "but I don't think killing her is going to help anyone."

"It's going to help me," Rila says in a violate voice that none of her comrades have ever heard her use before.

"Look, as much as I hate to admit it," Anya says, "we need her and every Marine available."

Rila makes a sound of disgust in her throat, "she isn't a warrior, she's too much of a coward to face me."

"That's not a good enough of an excuse," Rohit tries to say while gesturing his men to stay, they are close to breaking and running from the angry Sangheili.

"What about her?" is Rila's next question, "What's her excuse for insulting and trying to kill me?"

"What about Rookie?" Anya changes tact, "what would he want you to do?"

All of the anger sudden evaporate and guilt floods Rila's body. Her strong stance slowly drops and she feels herself stooping over a

little.

"I don't know," she finally says, "and we'll never know because he's out there, lost and is probably dead," she looks away, "and it's because of me."

She hears a sigh before Rohit speaks, "Rila that's war, you lose people, you can't always predict what's going to happen. Even the best warrior, the best bodyguard can't keep their principles safe, especially in these conditions."

His words made Rila feel better, but only a little. All that she is thinking of at the moment is all the times she has spent with Rookie and their confusing friendship. At some points he would be stone silent and ignorant of what is happening around him. Other times he gets so close to Rila and strokes her hair to the point that she just wants to lick him. Now though he is gone and they'll never know what it is that he truly thought of her.

"What Rohit is saying is that you did your best," Anya tries to say before Rila breaks in, "I wasn't even conscience when we landed, what if he needed me and-"

"Don't Rila," Rohit says, "making yourself feel guilty for something you're not even sure happen isn't going to help anyone and...What is going on out there?"

Rila was too busy brooding over her failures that she failed to notice the sound as well. She looks to the door and sees almost all the Troopers rushing to the front entrance and she tenses. For a moment she thought they are under attack, but then she hears the laughter and small cheers that the crowd is emitting.

Curious, the small group makes their way to the door and Rila just about feels her heart leap out of her throat.

Surrounded in a small crowd of Troopers are four figures covered in grit, three of whom are wearing familiar black body armor while the fourth is dressed in an assortment of ripped garments. One of the arrivals is limping and some of his body plating has been torn off, savage like scars crisscross over his body, but the man is still standing. The smaller figure next to him seems familiar and it isn't until he takes off his helmet that Rila is able to see who it is.

Next to her she hears Anya let out a small whoop before rushing forward. She shoulders through the crowd before reaching Wolfgang. She gives him a one armed hug before giving him a small playful shove. He laughs but there is something different about him though, almost as if he is self-cautious and weary around the others.

Before she can think further on this, the person in garments catches her attention. She sees the long hair and through the dust and dirt that covers the face Rila can tell that this is a female, and a rather attractive one apparently considering some of the male Marines are trying to get close to her. They are discourage though when she unslings a weapon and holds it in her hands with quite profession. For some reason she finds herself liking this female's attitude, it reminds her of her own wants to be accepted as a fellow warrior.



Movement catches her attention and she turns just in time to see the last Trooper removing his head gear. She feels air coursing through her lungs once more and a great feeling of warmth washes over her. The last Trooper is revealed to be Rookie. His familiar features suddenly causes her body to relax and before she can stop herself, she moves forward with tremendous speed.

Rookie is brushing the sweat from his hair when she grabs him by the shoulders and shook him a little until his eyes met hers. She can see the surprise in his gaze, but it slowly fades to reveal a bit of warmth. Maybe it is her imagination but she thought she saw a flicker of interest in those brown orbs, but it lasts only for a moment before disappearing.

It is then that she realizes what she has done. She is holding him by the shoulders, surrounded by the platoon of Marines. She can feel them starring at her while her own gaze is locked onto Rookie's bewildered face. She wants to look away from him, but that would mean facing the Troopers, she has no idea which is worse and which she prefers. She hears a high pitch whistle split the air followed by a few chuckles and people making a kind of 'oh' and 'ah' sounds. She completely froze in mortification, all she can do is hang onto Rookie while trying her best not to writher in humiliation.

Rookie keeps looking at her and slowly his face relaxes and calmness can be seen in his eyes. The smooth stoic person she has grown used to have return, but there is something different. A bit of kindness seeps into his eyes and his lips almost flickers into a smile. She has no idea what happened next but she grins back. It suddenly feels good being here with Rookie, better than good, almost great. As if something wonderful has just happened, he is here with her once more and it feels right with the world.

"Kiss her already!"

This snaps them both out of their trance; Rila practically threw Rookie away from her as she steps back. She doesn't know what a "kiss" is, but the laughter that surrounds her informs her that it is an action that most people would find amusing. She feels embarrassment and anger taking over her, she knows that voice. Now she really does what to strangle Azim.

"Whatâ€¦what's going on?" A voice she has never heard before asks.

She looks to the unknown female whose eyes are wide with what could pass for horror. She is starring at Rila and is now gripping her weapon tightly.

Rookie must have seen this for he grabs the barrel of the rifle and lowers it to the floor.

"Right," he finally says in a voice that sounds anxious, "Chloe this is Rila," he glances at his bodyguard in turn, "Rila," he gestures at the woman, "this is Chloe." He returns his eyes to the woman and says, "Rila is my bodyguard, a gift from the Sangheilis."

Suspicion and fear is still present in her eyes, but she has now allowed the gun to drop. With the tension gone, the Marines start to

chuckle and slap each other as they voice their relief of having their leader back. The few comments that are loud enough to hear cause Rookie's features to twitch a bit, the only sign that shows he is embarrassed as well. Rila has the sudden urge to go to him again and comfort him, but restrains it. It'll be inappropriate and-

"Finally," the giant figure of Scott breaks through the crowd and approaches Rookie, "what took you so long? You have no idea how much paperwork I had to do."

Rookie shakes his head before saying, "You have no idea Scott, where are the Commanders for the Infantry and Tank Squads?"

"In the war room," he says sarcastically.

"Right," Rookie then looks at his Marines, "get some rest people, we've got a job to do tomorrow."

A couple of cheers went into the air, but among them are a few Troopers, like Wolfgang, who suddenly looks sick. Rila feels herself becoming nervous as well. The drop was exhilarating and taxed a lot from her, but that wasn't combat. She hopes that she will be ready this time.

"Rila," she jerks awake and finds Rookie standing before her, a soft smile on his face. She smiles at him as well, showing her relief of having him back by her side for a moment before she questions him.

"Are you well Rookie?" she asks as she looks him over for injuries.

He is silent for a unit before saying, "I've got a burn on my shoulder, but other than that I'm-"

He doesn't finish as she suddenly grabs him and turns him around. She releases a small hiss at what she sees. Just revealing itself on his neck is red burn that has rendered the flesh to be delicate and no doubt sensitive. It looks like the damage goes farther down his spine, but before she could check; he wriggles out of her grasp and turns on her.

"As I was saying," he says in a slightly strained voice, "its fine."

"No its not," she tells him, "You need to have one of your healers look at it."

"Its fine," he repeats in an agitated voice, "it's not even that bad."

"Have a healer look it over," she demands again.

"Rila-"

"Rookie," she interrupts with a growl, "I am charged to look after your well-being, now you shall see a healer or else I will find one, dragged you to him and sit on you if I have to so that you can be properly cared for."

She can see the surprise in his eyes before he slowly reply,  
"Alright, but I need to talk to the commanders of this place."

"I'll go with you," she says, but he shakes his head.

"It'll be quick Rila," he says.

"But-"

"It'll be alright," he repeats, "I'm in a building surrounded by Troopers and Infantry men, what can harm me?" he asks while giving her another grin.

She thinks this through carefully until she finally sighs,  
"Alrightâ€¦I'll wait for you then."

Rookie nods to her before turning to join Scott and the female known as Chloe.

She watches him for a moment and turns to walk away. She is almost out of earshot when she is stopped dead by what she hears.

"You know Rook; you're not that bad looking."

She twists around but the group is already walking away. She can just see Rookie's uncomfortable face while Chloe follows from behind, smiling widely.

Something erupts within Rila and she is filled with immediate loathing for the female. An anger that is even worse than the boiling fury that is usually reserved for Azim. Her mind is now filled with visions of her cutting the female down to size in a hostile demander.

But why? She just met her, the human has never done anything to provoke Rila's wrath. What is provoking this feeling within her?

Suddenly something bumps into her elbow and moves her arm. She looks down to see Azim who is actually smiling at her. There is something sinister about the smile though and Rila instantly disliked it.

"Jealous aren't we?" she questions Rila.

"Jealous?" she asks before she could bite down on her curiosity.

"You want to be with the LT and not the blonde, right?" she asks mischievously.

In answer the Sangheili snarls, "it is Rookie's decision with whom he wishes to spend his time with." The words cause some sort of ache to originate from the female's chest.

Azim grabs Rila's hand and says, "Come on, I know what you need."

Rila whips her hand away from the human, "I don't need anything," she

snaps her mandibles for show of force.

Azim's face suddenly becomes one of understanding as she says, "believe me, this will help you feel better."

Rila wanted nothing to do with the human, but that small ache in her chest is, for some reason, enlarging before she finally sighs and nods in acceptance.

Azim leads her to a rather large room that has tables spaced out and sparking matter sprinkles the walls and ceiling. Large windows at the top of the room are the only things emitting pale light into the chamber. There is a long table like barrier that stretches alongside the wall, but there is a space between them. In the tiny area is a walkway with shelves that are stock with glass containers.

Rila was about to ask where they were, but Azim slides over the table and started looking through the crystal-like vessels. While she does this, Rila looks around the room once more and soon sees that there are others present as well. But they aren't Marines, they are the soldiers and almost all of them are either slumped over or leaning against each other or are speaking with a odd dialect.

"Here," she turns to find a bottle being pressed into her hand by Azim.

"What is this?" she questions as she looks into the glass and sees a suspicious looking liquid within.

"Just drink it," Azim commands as she takes a swig of her own bottle.

Carefully, Rila places the lip of the drink to her maw and sniffs. It doesn't smell too good, but she might as well try, she is a bit thirsty anyway.

She takes a small swig, but soon after begins coughing up a storm as it feels like her throat is being scorched.

"What is this?" she demands, "a demon's brew?"

Azim chuckles, "Well that's one thing people had called it throughout the ages," she takes another drink before continuing, "Just keep going, it'll get better."

"I don't think so," Rila begins to set the glass down when Azim suddenly grabs her wrist and thrusts the bottle back into the Sangheili's chest.

"Trust me," Azim says.

\* \* \*

><p>"I don't know about this plan Lieutenant," Sergeant Long says as he looks down at the map, "it looks awfully risky."<p>

"I thought you guys were supposed to do risky things," Chloe states.

"Yes, but we're not suicidal," Long gestures at the plans they have

drawn, "this may not be the smartest of moves LT. There are a lot of open spaces, Covies could come at us with Wraiths, Phantoms, and who knows what else. There are also snipers and traps set along the route." He glances up at Rookie, "We'll be risking all our tanks with this gambit," he says seriously, "those machines are the only things keeping the Covenant from all out invasion, are you sure you want to risk them?"

In answer, Rookie leans forward and say, "It's not the tanks holding the Covies back; it's the men inside them. And we're going to get more of them, who knows, some of those civis might actually be useful."

Chloe chimes in, "We have a nurse, a technician, a plumber, a former star grav-ball player and even a few old guys of the old breed, not to mention the angry people who are willing to kill."

"Exactly," Long says gravely, "people who aren't properly trained could get in the way or jeopardize any operation we try to execute."

"We know this," Chloe says with fire in her eyes, "but if we have a chance for making these butchers pay for what they have done, then we will do whatever you ask of us."

Long looks down as he thinks this through, allowing Rookie to add, "Plus we could use with the extra hands, who knows, maybe we can even teach some of them to use the tanks."

"Perhapsâ€|" Long says thoughtfully before a smirk makes it way onto his face as he looks over his shoulder and calls out, "What do you think Strakes?"

Lieutenant Strakes has been sitting in the corner, staring at the floor beneath his feet but looks up when he hears his name.

"What was that?" he asks.

"I said," Long repeats slowly, "what do you think?"

"Oh, yeah" Strakes smile before saying, "go for it," before looking down again.

Long chuckles as he glances at the map, "So what are we planning Trooper?"

"A plan that needs courage and common sense, which I hope these soldiers still have," Rookie says as he watches Strakes out of the corner of his eye.

"What about the Sangheili?" Long asks next, "how will she fair?"

Suddenly feeling defensive and somewhat insulted for some reason Rookie states, "Rila, is devoted, kind and a determine warrior. She is probably the most level headed person here in this entire city."

\* \* \*

><p>"What does she has that I don't have?" Rila questions as she stumbles around while pacing, "she is beautiful I suppose, but Rookie deserves better."<p>

Azim is sitting on a nearby stool nursing her own glass before saying, "Men, they are all idiots, he doesn't even know that you have feelings for him."

"It isn't his fault," Rila says, collapsing onto the seat next to Azim, "I never told him how I feel."

"How do you feel anyway?" Azim asks curiously.

Rila doesn't know why, but she starts speaking. Normally she wouldn't even think of having this conversation with this female, but it feels as if none of that matters now as she speaks her mind.

"I feel warm, safe and protective whenever I am around Rookie," she admits as she picks up the glass bottle and tries to take a sip, but she misses her mouth and instead the liquid wets her mandibles. She growls before continuing, "I've never felt this way towards any male before, especially towards a humanâ€¦I've seen the hatred humans can posses, but Rookie is probably the most considerate person I have ever met. I have never even seen a human since I first got here so I do not know what all of this could possibly mean."

"I think I do," Azim chuckles, "I think you love him."

Rila waves the statement away, "Impossible, besides," she sighs, "that female he is with is a better match for him."

"Really?" Azim asks.

"No," Rila snarls, "I could do so much better, but Rookie will never see it that way."

"You'd be surprise," Azim says, "all men are the same; they just needâ€¦a little persuasion."

"What do you mean?" Rila asks as a small and startling feeling of hope fills her.

\* \* \*

><p>"Well that was something," Chloe says as she and Rookie leaves the meeting room and makes their way to the lobby.<p>

"They agreed," Rookie says, "That's all that matters."

Chloe chuckles, "Right," she becomes silent before asking in a hesitant tone, "Doâ€¦do you really think we can get the people from my camp here? Alive?"

Rookie exhales and shakes his head, "I don't know Chloeâ€¦this is a warzone."

"I know," she says softly before looking at Rookie, "but you will try your best, right?"

"Of course," Rook answers, but what else can he say?

Chloe then leans in kisses his cheek, catching Rookie off guard. She smiles at him before saying, "Thanks, see you in the morning," and with that she leaves him and heads off in search of a room.

Rookie stares after her in shock before shaking his head clear. No time to focus on that right now, besides he should go see how Rila is doing.

At the thought of the Sangheili a certain type of emotion takes over and he actually grins. He missed her more than he originally thought. It scared him a little at how powerful these emotions are, but he brushes it off. He walks around the lobby, but it's pretty obvious the near seven foot alien isn't there. He then walks the perimeter of the room, glancing into each and every interior chambers. As he does so he exchanges greeting and small talk whenever he meets a Trooper. They are all in high spirits after seeing him again, did they really depend on him that much? Maybe after seeing how Strakes was acting they're suddenly glad for having a leader like him, even if they haven't seen him in action yet.

He hesitates at the bar where many of the soldiers are assembled. He doesn't want to deal with a drunken infantry man, besides, there is no way Rila would have gone in there. Still he pokes his head in and performs a quick sweep of the area.

There are people passed out on their chairs, tables and the floor, and the few who are still able to stand are leaning on one another to remain upright. As he suspected almost all of them are Strakes men, there are a few Troopers, but they are making sure they stay below the line of "wasted." He is about to leave when an unfamiliar shape catches his attention at the bar. His jaw drops upon seeing who it is.

There is Rila, sitting on the chair as she listens to Azim as they talk. She and Azim talking without it resulting in a fist fight? Rookie is close to praying that Azim is being civil for once, but still he fast walks towards the bar. As he approaches he sees that Rila is sitting a little straighter with her head held high, perhaps she didn't drink-

Suddenly Rila looks over her shoulder and sees him.

A huge smile covers her face as she slurs out the words, "Greeting Rookie."

The young officer is speechless as he stares at his companion for a while before approaching cautiously.

"Rila?" he says slowly, "Are you feeling alright?"

She laughs before attempting to stand. However she stumbles and is about to fall, but Rookie reaches out and catches her. He grunts as strain is place on his burns, maybe he should have seen a doctor like Rila said he should.

He huffs as he attempts to righted Rila up, but the young woman is a lot heavier than he thought she was.

"Rila," he says through gritted teeth, "what have you done?"

She gazes at Rookie with a wavering gaze before saying, "I do not understand to what you are referring to little human."

Little human? There is defiantly something wrong here.

A chuckle draws his attention to Azim, and the six empty bottles littering the counter.

"Azim!" Rookie shouts, waking a few slumbering soldiers.

Azim throws her hands in the air as she feigns innocents, "what sir?"

"Did youâ€¦|did the two of youâ€¦|" Rookie couldn't force the words out of his mouth so instead he gestures at the bottles.

"I only drank one," Azim mummurs, "she had the others."

Five bottles?

"Azim," he says in an exasperated voice, "what are you thinking? Rila is an alien; we have no idea what effects liquor could have-"

Rila pushes herself away from Rookie and tries to stand on her own, but trips over her feet. Rookie grabs her midsection and pulls her upright, resulting with him holding her in an embrace like fashion.

"Looks like the same effects it would have on a human," Azim chuckles before standing and stretches, "guess I'll turn in for now." She walks off in a uncoordinated way that would have made Rookie laugh any time before now.

"Hold it Azim," he says, all the while hanging onto Rila as tries to escape his hold, "you can't just-"

"With all due respect sir, I need some rest for the mission tomorrow," she says with a grin and wobbles out of the room.

Rookie is freezes at what Azim has said. Maybe Rila can sleep the effects off before tomorrow; otherwise they're both in trouble.

"Come on Rila," he groans a little as he takes a bulk of her weight and starts leading her away, "let's find you a bed."

"A bed?" she giggles, she giggled?! Rookie's concern is growing with every passing second.

"But Rookie," she says, "the night is young," she then leans in close to her face until their eyes are almost level, his orbs staring into her slits, "we should spend time together and drink to your victory, that's what Azim said we should do."

"I think you have done plenty of drinking for the both of us," Rookie says as a comeback, but he stops when a small group of intoxicated soldiers wanders pass them. They took one look at the couple and falls into a laughing fit as they head into the main lobby.



Rookie slows before glancing out the room. There are still plenty of Marines out there. How will they react when they see Rila like this? Worse, how will it affect Rila when she finally comes back to her sense?

He decides to walk alongside the wall, or rather stumble, as he tries to get Rila to one of the ground floor rooms. Hopefully there is one that's available, most of them have been destroyed or has been stocked full with the few supplies that they have accumulated.

As they move he catches glimpses of Scott, Anya, Wolfgang, and a few others. Hopefully with the fading lights and the shadows, no one will be able to see Rila. Then again, her body features are about as far as you can get from that of a human.

Finally they slide into an empty corridor and proceeds onwards. It was obviously a nice and fancy hotel once. Faded designs clings to the wall in shreds, broken shards of colorful pottery litters the floor and every so often a small piece of plaster would fall as if shaken by an unidentified earth tremor.

Rookie walks as far back into the hall as possible, wanting to find an isolated spot where Rila can rest without being disturbed. The female in question has become quiet, except for the small tune she is starting to hum.

Under different circumstance Rookie would have found all this amusing, but not here; not when they need everyone level headed for an important operation tomorrow.

He finally stops at the second to last suite and peers inside. It is clear of people and crates of ammo. All that is within is a large bed in the center of the room, a television set rests in front of it, but the hole in its center suggests it's out of commission's. There is a closet next to the door and on the other side of the room is a large looking restroom. The chamber appears to be a suite for it's larger than the previous ones that Rookie and Rila had to pass.

Rookie shuts the door hobbles to the bed before gently easing Rila off his aching shoulder.

"Rila," he says, "you just sleep here for a while, ok? I need to go and-"

He is interrupted when Rila suddenly grabs him and pulls him into the folds of the bed.

"Why not stay?" she asks in her drunken stupor.

Rookie is starting to become alarm, especially now that he notices how close they are. He tries to wriggle out of her grip, but she keeps a tight hold on him and presses her side against his.

"Rila," he says cautiously, "I don't know what you think you are doing, but-"

Her grip on him tightens and before he could process what is going on, her talons tears downwards and rips off the armor on his right side. He is staring in shock at what has just occurred before realizing she is doing the same to the other side. Now he lays with

all of his upper armor pieces off, his chest plate is the only thing he has left on.

"Rila," he says in a stunned voice, "What are you trying to-"

She sits upright before grabbing the straps on his armor chest and unhooks them. Rookie isn't sure which is more stunning, the fact that she knows how to take the armor off, or that it's Rila who is performing the actions.

He tries to speak, but his voice wouldn't come. It's like a dream, he is trying to command his body to move, to jump out of the bed, but it is as if he is caught in some sort of trap that refuses to let him go. On one side he is horrified by what is happening, yet on the other side—he isn't really sure what the other side is voicing.

Slowly, Rila removes the armor piece, leaving Rookie with only his olive green shirt and armored leggings. Realizing there is really nothing more that can be taken off, he finally breaks from the odd influence that has enraptured him and he pushes himself up on his elbows.

"Rila, I really don't think we should-"

The Sangheili cut him off again by doing the last thing he expected, she grabbed a handful of the shirt before tearing it off.

"Rila!" Rookie finally cries out as he now lays in the female's grasp, bare chested.

Rila only gives a grin, but it slowly fades as she stares down at Rookie. Curious, he looks down as well to see what has caught her attention.

She is gaping at the multitude of scars that has been carved onto his chest. There is a faded plasma burn on his upper shoulder, a claw slash on his rib cage and a long slice that runs from his chest and runs diagonally down his torso until it reaches the right side of his hip.

Rila looks mesmerized by the sights before bringing her talons down and gently stroke the old marks. Rookie shivers at her touch, they feel pleasant and calming. She moves her hand back and forth across his torso, rubbing it lovingly.

That thought causes him to sit up quickly as he remembers the situation that he is in at the moment.

"Rila, stop," he finally breathes out as she tries to sit up as well, but he grabs her by the shoulders and pushes her down. He leans forward until their eyes meet and he says, "You need to sleep this off, in the morning it'll-"

At that moment Rila sticks her tongue out and licks the side of his cheek. He froze once again at the feeling. Though it was wet, there is some sort of warmth that the action has, almost like a kiss, only longer and bigger. She licks the same spot on the cheek over and over again in a slow pace as if she is savoring the experience.

All the while Rookie is trying to get up and break free from the influence.

\_Am\_ \_I\_ \_about\_ \_to\_ \_be\_ \_violated\_? He thought in his panic state, \_by\_ \_my\_ \_own\_ \_bodyguard\_? \_By\_ \_Rila\_?!

Rook finally snaps himself out of the muddled state and shifts his position, opening his mouth to speak, but is stopped.

Even Rila pauses when she is caught off guard at what has happened. Rookie had unknowingly shifted his face into the position where Rila was licking his cheek and opened his mouth to speak. In that small span she had place her tongue inside his mouth by accident.

However revulsion doesn't fill Rookie, instead it fills him with warmth. This action reminds him of all the time he and Clara use to sneak out at night and spend time together. It has been years since Rookie has last kissed anyone, he isn't sure if this would be considered a kiss, but it feels like it to him.

Rookie suddenly loses control, urge forward by the pleasure and the warmth, he pushes forward. Rila's mandibles has pressed themselves together when their tongues became interlock and before Rook could rethink himself, he leans over some more until his lips touches Rila's united ones.

Now it is Rookie who is leading as he lies on top of the Sangheili. He rolls onto his side and pulls Rila close, all the while doing his best not to break contact. With one hand he caresses her cheek and with the other he grabs her midsection and gently pulls her closer to his body. Her form is rigid at first, but slowly, almost inevitably, she relaxes into his embrace as they perform the action that she probably never felt before.

Rookie never felt this way either. It reminds him of Clara, but this is different. Rila's leather like skin feels nice against his hand as he rubs it along the side of her body. Her body is curvy, not much like a human woman would be, but curvy nevertheless. A small purr suddenly originates from her chest and it grows in strength as time goes by. This feels good to Rookie, especially after spending days crawling through the mud and fighting for nearly an entire day. This feeling is soothing, comforting and even-

"Rookie!"

Rook sits up, disentangling his lips from her mandibles. They stare at each other in confusion and a little of passion as they pant for air. Yet what scares him is the look of somberness that is present in her eyes, this isn't the use of alcohol that propelled her to do it; she actually had feelings for him.

And they just kissed. What could this mean for-

"Rookie!" the voice says again, this time Rook is able to identify it as that of Scott's. From the sound of it, he isn't that far from the room.

He jumps out of bed, rushes to the door, looks at Rila and said, "good night," and leaves.

He leans against the portal entrance as he tries to catch his breath, he was still semi-stun by what has just occurred and frighten by the thought of getting caught. He presses his ear to the door but hears no movement, has Rila finally settle in to sleep?

"There you are," Rook turns to find Scott standing before him, "Strakes and Long, or rather Long, wants to talk to you real quick about night patrols."

His eyes then look Rook over as if just now realizing his young commanding officer is missing his upper clothes.

"What happened to you?" he asks, noticing Rook still trying to suck in oxygen.

"I, uh, I-I," Rook stumbles for a bit before finally wrestling out, "I just had a quick workout."

Scott looks Rook over again before saying, "it looks like it was intense."

Rook chuckles, "You have no idea."

\*\*Sorry for the long wait, had a small writer block trying to think this chapter through and trying to decide whether or not to have some action. Thanks for reading and I hope you enjoyed.\*\*

## 9. The Conversation

\*\*The Conversation\*\*

Rook feels exhausted, but he can't fall asleep.

Every time he feels comfortable enough to slip away, sudden mental images would bring him back, all concerning a certain someone. Or a certain Sangheili to be more precise.

He just can't wrap it around his head to accept what has happened a few hours ago. How could Rila have done that? At first he assumed it was because she was drunk and wasn't thinking correctly, but then when he saw the calculating and seriousness in her eyes he realizes she wasn't intoxicated. Maybe she was and she just sobered up quickly, he just doesn't know, Rila could have been the first alien to have a taste of alcohol so there's no real way of knowing what is normal for a drunk alien.

He is set to write this off and rest, figuring he can deal with it in the morning, but his mind is still buzzing, about what, he has no idea. There is the new fact that Rila has somehow developed a powerful emotion for him, it's almost overwhelming when he thinks back to the kiss they shared, if it could be called that. It was actually quite pleasant, but then there is the fact she almost used him for her own needs.

He covers his face with his hands and releases a muffled moan. Violated, kissed and finally making outâ€|not the best encounter he have had with a Sangheiliâ€|but it wasn't the worse either.

Finally he decides to admit the fact. He can't get any sleep because

his mind is buzzing, not about Rila and her secret crush, but because of him, what did he feel?

He shrugs off the covers and stands up before beginning to pace the room while sinking into deep thoughts.

It has been a long time, a very long time, since he last felt anything like this. The last encounter he had with a woman was his old girlfriend Clara Kitchens who had died along with his family when the Covenant had attacked. He didn't see her die, but he watched his family perished; his mother consumed in flames, his father literally torn to pieces and his brother—he didn't see what happened to him, but he should have done more. Should have prevented it.

His hands curl into fists and he releases an agitated growl. He is, angry with the Covenant, the Sangheilis, for what they have done and here he is confused with how he feels around Rila. He only knew her for three days for crying out loud, how could this have happened?

He finally sighs and runs a hand through his hair. As much as he hates to admit it, there is only one way of resolving this matter.

\* \* \*

><p>Rila releases another moan as a wave of nausea threatens to overtake her, but she holds it in again. Warriors don't get sick, but her body is telling her otherwise.<p>

She has no idea what that accursed drink was or how it affected her so powerfully, but it did and it made her do unthinkable actions.

She lets out another pitiful sound as the memories of what happened in the previous units replays in her mind.

She has acted foolishly, no she acted like a complete, senseless, imbecile. She not only shamed herself but the very Sa'u name. She had advanced on a male, the very last thing any female should ever do and she took it a step forward. She shivers when she recalls her ludicrous thoughts; she was about ready to mate, with or without Rookie's consent.

She is overcome with sudden guilt and shame. Never has she figured events would spiral out of control this badly and now Rookie, the very man she is supposed to protect, probably hates her for what she has done. What she has come close to doing. Here she is ordered to guard him and instead she nearly—mated with him.

She couldn't believe this, out of everything that could have happened to her, to Rookie, why this? She'll never drink that strange liquid again, and if she so much as catches the scent that belongs to Azim, she's going to—

Rila suddenly stiffens when she hears a small knock on the door. She briefly panics before calming herself down, figuring that it must be an ally, no enemy soldier would announce their presence, correct?

The serenity though is shattered when the door creaks open and she smells a familiar scent invades the small living space. Her eyes

widen in sudden horror as she covers her face with her hand and curls into a ball, dreading whatever it is he has come here to say.

\* \* \*

><p>Rookie silently closes the door and checks his watch.<p>

0127; he has to be out before someone sees him and get the wrong idea about why he is in Rila's room.

One side of his conscious is scolding him for avoiding the patrols and not telling anyone where he is going to be. If they are attacked by the Covies than they will have no idea where to find him. Or, on a more embarrassing note, if Rila tries anything on him again then he can't expect to be rescued.

He shakes this last thought off and glances around the room.

The interior is dark, but his eyes adjust, helping him to see shadows within shadows. He can see no one else in the room, no window, the door is shut and his armor and torn shirt is still lying on the floor. But his main focus is on the lump in the bed directly in front of him.

Rila appears to have buried herself within the blankets and curled into a ball. He briefly wonders if she is asleep, but he then notes the uneven breathing and guesses she is awake, and from the sound of it she is hyperventilating.

"Rila," he says softly as he approaches, clearly seeing the covers shiver when he said her name.

He waits a moment, but when she doesn't respond he speaks again.

"Rilaâ€¦Iâ€¦" his voice dies as he wonders what it is he is supposed to say. Thanks? What's wrong with you? What's wrong with me?

Finally he hears the female alien sigh and she speaks, "Rookie...Iâ€¦I-I'm really sorry," she says in a rushed voice, "It won't happen again, I swear."

She said all of this while hidden beneath the covers, making him wonder if she is either nervous or maybe even afraid. Afraid of what though? Of him? She is a small Sangheili but he knew she is still ten times stronger than him and can tear him to shreds if she wanted.

It sounded like she has just voiced everything he has come to talk to her about, but he feels that he needs to have his say on this matter.

He inhales deeply before saying, "Rila we need to talk."

He sees her stiffen from her feeble cover and Rookie suddenly has a strong urge to comfort her. She may be his bodyguard but she is here with them, the Marines, and as the leader he needs to look after their welfare. That's his explanation for the feeling within him, but he knows that's not it, there's more to it.

"Please Rookie," Rila says in a weak tone, "I know you are angry,

butâ€|just don't inform the council, or my Keep," she shivers again, "I beg you, I've caused them enough embarrassment as is."

Despite the seriousness of this talk, Rookie couldn't help but get sidetracked.

"What do you mean?" he questions and moves closer to the bed, "what embarrassments? You are probably one of the most sensible person I have met, well at least here you are."

Suddenly she sits up and looks at him, and he is surprised to see hostility in her eyes.

"Do not mock me," she hisses, "you know what I speak of, you know howâ€|how foolish I can be," she breaks off and looks to the floor.

He studies her silently; her near blue skin casts off a light sheen while her mandibles move in complete cohesion with her breathing. What makes him feel anything towards her? What makes her special?

He gulps once before saying, "Rila, that was alcohol," she looks up at him and he sees the confusion in her eyes, "the drink, the one you guzzled down, it can put someone at ease, but it also make their minds hazy."

She shakes her head sadly with her downcast eyes, "it still does not make up for my actions."

Rookie shrugs, "True, but at least you know better now."

She nods and they fall into silence.

"Why are you here if not to gloat or to make me feel horrible?" She finally asks, "You have more than enough reason to, and yet here you are trying to comfort me."

He offers a smile before saying, "I honestly have no idea, but I know the blame is not entirely your fault, and I don't know what these other 'embarrassments' you speak of are, but I'm sure there's a sound reason for each."

She snorts and locks her eyes with his, "I embarrass my Keep with my size, true I am tall compared to humans, but among my people I am seen as puny."

He couldn't argue with that, almost every Sangheili Rookie has encountered was over seven feet tall, Rila appears to be about six foot eleven.

"You're unique, that's all," Rookie says in light encouragement.

"I'm strange by our standards," she retorts, looking away from him, "people would come and laugh at me while elders of neighboring fiefs believe there is something wrong with our breeding and considers any female, particularly me, to be abnormal."

"Well by my standards you are special," Rookie barely registers the shock when he realizes what he has said when Rila looks up, confusion

and shyness in her gaze.

"You do?" she whispers.

Rookie couldn't speak, here's the moment of truth and he's tongue tied.

He finally groans and covers his face with his hands before saying, "Rila I just don't know."

"Oh," he hears the slight hurt in her tone and he forces his limbs from his eyes and looks at her again.

"Rila I don't know what to think," He admits, "I know I like you andâ€|maybe more," he sees her eyeing him suspiciously as if trying to see if he is trying to deceive her.

He sighs before collapsing on the bed so that he and Rila are at eye level, "I don't know what it is that makes you feel the way you do when you look at me," he sees her grow fidgety, "I saw it Rila, you were drunk but I saw the truth in your eyes; you have feelings for me."

He never thought he would see a Sangheili look so flustered, but Rila does. Her breathing seems to have increase and her body has started to twitch uncontrollably. He would have found the reaction amusing, maybe even along the lines of being adorable, but he doesn't say it, not now.

"Look," he says with what he hopes to be a voice of confidence, "Rila, you don't want to get involved with me," he sees her eyes growing wide so he hurries with what he is saying, "you are a wonderful and very animate person to be with, you really are," he then gestures at himself, "but I'm your opposite. I'm quite, reserve, and I have killed thousands of soldiers, hundreds of Sangheilis." He sees her shy away slightly at this last remark, he didn't want to scare her, but he figures it's best if she knew what kind of a man he is and what it is that he has done.

"There has to be," he starts again after a second of silence, "I know there are, people, men, who can offer you more than I ever could, who will really make you feel loved." He thought he saw her eyes growing misty before he finishes, "I can't be that person Rila, I have seen too much death, been exposed to too much violence to even be consideredâ€|courtship material."

\* \* \*

><p>She is silent as she takes all of this in while altering between looking at him to glancing over him, clearly in deep thought.<p>

He cares for her. He doesn't say it, but she detects it, he does care for her.

She gulps as she beholds the human, her charge, before her.

She is unsure if he is considered "attractive" among his kind, however she does know for a fact that no sane Sangheili would take him as a potential mate. He is smaller than her, but he is cunning, strong, tough, and has a deeply buried consciousness that he only



uses around her and his men. A good tactical commander and the only one who she would go as far as to call a friend, perhaps even farther.

But what of her family? What of her sister Fila? Their mother? Uncle Lax'e? What would they make of her desires should they ever discover them?

She tries to push these thoughts away though when she looks at the human before her, wondering what to say next before she asks a question that she must say, an answer she must know.

"Do you," she begins, "feel anything for me?"

He doesn't respond until after a unit has passed, but he doesn't meet her gaze.

"I don't know Rila," he is quiet before looking up at her, "You have no problems or doubts about this at all?" He looks her in the eye with his brown orbs, "do you honestly believe you love me Rila? A human?"

She keeps her gaze steady before saying, "I know that we have done both of our people wrong, but what matters to me is the fact that you are trying to make amends for it."

He shrugs at her and gives a small smile; "It's something my father taught me, to never hate otherwise you'll lose yourself" he becomes slightly downcast as he says, "which sort of happened to me during the war."

She nods her head in appreciation, "Your father was a wise man."

He is silent for a moment, "Yeah he was" what about you?" He glances up at her, "what's your father like?"

She blinks in response, "My father? Why do you ask?"

He shrugs, "I don't know" I just want to know more about you so I can make a decision."

She could have sworn her hearts have stopped beating in that instant, but she tries her best to keep her head leveled.

"Very well," she wrings her hands nervously, the thought of Rookie learning more about her makes her feel rather nervous. "I know he is a good swordsman and must have some power but that's it."

Rookie has a distant look on his face, but he focuses on her when she said those words.

"What do you mean that's it?" he questions.

"I do not know who my father is," she says simply, "I am aware it is common among humans to know who your parent are, but on Sanghelios such information is forbidden."

Rookie frowns, "So how is it that you know your bloodline then?"

"Through our Keep," she explains, "we only know that whoever helps give us birth is within the walls, either a guard, an elder or maybe even a direct descendent of the Keep lord himself."

"If you are descendent of a Keep Lord, doesn't that make you, like a special case, to inherit something maybe?" Rookie questions in interest.

Rila nods her head, "Indeed, if the the young is of the same blood as the Keep lord, he or she isn't told of this until they reaches maturity, then they can be trained and prepared to rule the fortress as the next Keep Lord."

"Like a monarchy," comments Rookie, "only the person knows who his parents are from the beginningâ€|why aren't you told who your family is? I know you have a sister, Fila, but how do you know she is related to you?"

"We are told who are siblings are," she replies, " as well as our mother, and sometimes we have a uncle who helps raise us, in our case we had our uncle Lax'e, who told us mostly who are father is. His identity is kept secret from us so each youngling has a equal chance at achieving their own personal destiny and glory."

"Can't your mother tell you who your father is?" Rookie asks next.

"Yes, but she isn't allowed," Rila releases a sad sigh, "I try to tell myself that it is of no consequence, butâ€|deep downâ€|I think everyone on Sanghelios would like to know who their father is."

Rookie nods in sympathy, "I guess I was lucky to know who my dad was."

"Dad?"

"A human word for father," he informs her, "mother can be mom, brother could be called bro, and sister can be called sis. All depending on who raises you or what region you are from I guess."

She smiles for a moment before it falls again as she remembers what they have spoken of a long while ago, back at his home. He had treasured his family, and it was the Covenant who has taken them away from him. Does he hold her responsible for it? Blame her for what has been done to their race? Is that one of the reasons why he hesitates? Why is this so confusing?

"I don't blame you."

Rila leans back in slight shock at what he has just said cut off guard.

"What?"

He looks her in the eye again, "I don't blame you for what happened Rila, I know you are the last person in the whole universe who wouldn't do such a thing," she is surprised when he grins at her, "I

doubt you would even consider starting a war even when you are drunk."

She gapes at him for a moment before he gives a small chuckle, which evoked a smile from her in turn. She knew he wasn't laughing at her, more like he is laughing with her.

They sit in comfortable silence until Rookie stands, "I need to go before they realize I'm not in my room."

Rila nods in understanding before becoming embarrassed when she watches the human stoop down and picks up his armor that she has torn off of him. He catches her eye and smiles as he makes his way to the door.

Rila starts to shift around to get more comfortable when she hears Rookie coming to a halt.

Curious, she looks back at him and sees that he has stopped in front of the door, staring at it as if waiting for something to happen.

She watches him for a moment, a little concern and is about to speak when she hears him say, "Urquidez."

"What?" she asks, baffled and wonders if he just spoke gibberish.

He looks over her shoulder and she is surprised to see his eyes, they look suddenly tender and filled with a kind of emotion.

"My family name, it is Urquidez," he says in a voice barely above a whisper as if he is revealing a deep secret.

His name—it is not his first, but it reveals a little about him. But that's not what captivates her, what catches her attention is that he has chosen to tell her. To reveal a part of his life that he has kept guarded from the rest of the world. He trusts her—more than anyone else in this entire building, probably in this entire world.

Rookie gulps a couple of times before saying, "good night," and with that, he opens the door and slips out without a sound.

There is silence in her room, but Rila feels exhilarated, an emotion riled by the amount of trust he has now placed on her, and she will never betray it, she will keep this secret as carefully as he has. A feeling that is almost as wonderful as the contact of her mandibles on his lips when they performed that unconscious action a couple of units ago.

"Urquidez," she whispers softly into her pillow, an odd name, but for some reason it strikes her very being. She has fallen for a man of the Urquidez family line.

This sentence alone, for some reason, causes her to smile.

**\*\*AN:** If you are reading Halo An Unexpected Alliance, I am sorry to say I have yet to begun working on it and the chapter I have in mind will be a long one so it won't be up until probably March, sorry but I am really busy at the moment. Thanks for reading and I hope you

enjoyed. \*\*

End  
file.